

SGTM 4: Stress Management

The 4th Standardized Generic Training Module (SGTM 4) describes types of stress that peacekeepers may experience in peace operations and ways of managing the impacts of that stress.

Background

Peacekeepers are typically competent and resilient professionals working under extraordinary conditions. They are vulnerable to stress because of the hazardous, austere and isolated nature of their work and their working environments. The occupational complexities of peace operations and peacekeepers' prolonged separation from family and other support systems exacerbate those risks. The consequences of stress are predictable and normal responses to their extraordinary circumstances.

Education and preventive measures for stress management are essential in promoting effectiveness of peacekeeping missions.

Aim

The aim of SGTM 4 is to inform peacekeepers about stress, its symptoms and how to protect themselves from its effects.

Learning Outcome

After completing module 4, peacekeepers should be familiar with different types of stress and different ways of dealing and coping with stress.

Assessment Criteria

On completion of this module, every peacekeeper should be able to

- Define in general terms what stress is.
- List and explain three types of stress.
- Explain stress management techniques and guidelines.

Duration and Time Schedule

The syllabus of a 45-minute presentation on SGTM 4 is outlined below. No more than 30 minutes should be used for the lecture. The remaining 15 minutes should be given to questions and general discussion. The trainer should modify the time allocated to this module according to national training requirements.

Syllabus Outline

- Structure of the presentation
- What is stress?
- Basic stress
- Cumulative stress
- Traumatic stress
- Overview — impacts and management of stress
- Summary

Notes On Methodology, Content and Teaching Materials

SGTM 4 has a theoretical orientation that is best presented by a trainer who is qualified by experience and training in stress management — for example, a military psychologist.

At the outset of the presentation, the trainer should inform trainees of the content, format and timing. Knowing what to expect, trainees can improve their ability to focus on the subject and benefit from the presentation.

The trainer should relate examples and experience of stress impacts and management in peace operations from his or her own country. Trainees should be encouraged to contribute examples that show the impacts of stress and ways to manage it in their work and daily life.

The trainer should involve participants in group discussions that enhance their learning outcomes. The trainer should use simple questions that allow participants to express what they know about stress, such as:

- “What does [basic/cumulative/traumatic] stress mean to you?”
- “Can you give an example?”
- “Can you describe a stressful situation that you have had to deal with?”
- “How do you think that stress management could help you?”

Using a flip chart or dry markers and a board, the trainer can summarize what has been said and set the stage for the next slide.

Peacekeepers may evaluate their own state of stress whenever they like by completing a questionnaire that is included in the digital library. The self-evaluation test is part of the text of the *United Nations Stress Management Booklet* (reference 82). It is also available from the website www.un.org/Depts/dpko/medical/pdfs/903present-stress.pdf.

References

5 to 10	24	37 to 42	46	59	
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MODULE CONTENT

Structure of the Presentation

A standard presentation on stress management for peacekeepers at the basic level should include:

- What is stress?
- Basic stress
- Cumulative stress
- Traumatic stress
- Overview — impacts and management of stress.

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What Is Stress?

Stress is a normal part of our lives. It is the tension or pressure we feel in reaction to difficulties that we face. Stress is our normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Stress shows itself in both physical and mental ways:

- Heightened physical or physiological awareness that prepares our body to react to danger.
- Psychological arousal that enhances our performance, emotions and behaviour.

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Stress first manifests itself as a state of heightened awareness that helps us to:

- Concentrate our full attention on the danger or difficulty.
- Mobilize our maximum physical energy.
- Prepare to respond.

Usually we can observe our first reactions to stress in our

- Eyes — our pupils get bigger (improving our peripheral vision).
- Heartbeat — our pulse increases (as the heart pumps more blood to the muscles).

A state of stress prepares us for 3 options: “the 3 F’s” of

- Fright
- Flight
- Fight.

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Stress is a part of everyday life. While stressful feelings are not usually considered to be a positive aspect of life, stress has always served an informative purpose for humans. It has been a key to survival from prehistoric times to the present day.

Stress is

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- Essential for survival
- Necessary for social development
- Useful in other ways (but too much stress can be unhealthy)
- Addictive
- Manageable.

While stress may be a normal part of daily life, it consumes physical, cognitive and emotional energy. Peacekeepers need to understand and control their reactions so that the stress interferes as little as possible with their ability to function properly. This module describes 3 levels of stress and ways of managing them.

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The 3 types of stress are

- Basic stress
- Cumulative stress
- Traumatic stress.

Basic Stress

Everyone experiences basic, minor stress in daily situations that can produce tension, irritation, frustration or anger. Vulnerability to stress is determined by physical and psychological strength or weakness.

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Reactions to stress vary according to the situation just before the stressful incident and to several types of personal characteristics, such as

- Experience with stressful situations
- Education, training
- Professional skills, capacities
- Age
- Physical fitness
- Self-confidence, self-esteem
- Spiritual or philosophical outlook.

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Peacekeepers often encounter stressful situations, particularly if they are serving in a conflict zone. Typical sources of basic, daily stress in the field are

- Little or no control over immediate situation.
- Threatening surroundings.
- Repetitive or boring duties and few challenges.

- Limited sleep and “personal space”; little possibility for contemplation, privacy and separation from other members of the unit.
- Lack of variety in meals.
- Few opportunities for recreation.
- Little contact with loved ones at home.

Managing Basic Stress

Most stress can be managed. Determination and self-discipline are keys to coping with the sources of stress before it can escalate to an uncontrollable level.

Usually stress management plans include learning different ways of doing old tasks. At first, the effects of stress can be alleviated by common-sense measures, some active, some restful.

The following guidelines have proven to be effective in developing stress management plans:

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- Identify the sources of stress.
- Know personal limitations.
- Manage time carefully.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat regularly.
- Do not abuse alcohol, tobacco, other substances.
- Make time for relaxation, physical exercise.
- Develop satisfying friendships.
- Nurture a positive spirit and outlook.
- Cultivate a sense of humour, laugh often.

Cumulative Stress

Cumulative stress results from stress and strain that

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- Occurs often (high frequency).
- Lasts a long time (long duration).
- Is severe (high intensity).

Such elevated stress becomes distress, which leads to exhaustion and other effects. The sufferer cannot cope with the level of stress that he or she is experiencing.

Cumulative stress results from the accumulation of basic stresses that “get to” a peacekeeper, influencing his or her thinking and well-being. It is subtle but pervasive. It frequently arises from a combination of personal, work-related and specific incidents that generate frustration.

Peacekeepers are generally confronted with many daily frustrations, especially when working in a conflict zone. They are often asked to

- Fulfil a seemingly impossible mandate.
- Conduct themselves circumspectly as representatives of the United Nations.
- Work with colleagues who may be personally or culturally incompatible.
- Show impartiality in difficult situations that may mean they must stifle natural reactions, even in the face of atrocities and their perpetrators.
- Negotiate unexpected and intricate situations with perhaps little experience, where the outcome will impact on the mission the United Nations and themselves as well as the victims and conflicting parties.
- Deal with hostility and lack of appreciation from the parties involved.

Burnout

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When it goes unnoticed, or when it is not well managed, cumulative stress can result in “burnout”. Someone suffering from burnout

- Changes attitudes concerning his or her work, colleagues and the victims of incidents witnessed.
- Avoids work; or, alternatively, becomes totally immersed in it and ignores all other aspects of life.
- Develops a depressed outlook, loss of self-esteem, sadness, guilt or grief.

Flame-Out

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If a person’s needs of rest, proper food and exercise are ignored, the so-called “flame-out” phenomenon may result. Symptoms of flame-out are

- Intense fatigue, nervous exhaustion; often associated with hyperactivity.
- Feelings of sadness, discouragement, depression, guilt, remorse, hopelessness.
- Denial of real state of emotional and physical exhaustion.
- Loss of objectivity in assessing personal performance.

Managing Cumulative Stress

Cumulative stress develops over time, so that a person may not be able to recognize the signs of stress easily. It becomes a “habit” that must be broken by making a conscious effort to change the manner in which the sufferer reacts to stress or its source. That may necessitate changing his or her expectations, attitudes, lifestyle or philosophy.

First of all, it is important to listen when others begin to say: “Lighten up. Take some time off. Don’t be so serious; have some fun ...” and similar advice. When they recognize their problem, peacekeepers suffering from cumulative stress can then

- Take personal responsibility for their stress; only the sufferer can identify accurately the sources of stress in his or her life and do what is required to improve the situation.
- Learn how to accept what cannot be changed; not every stressful situation can be changed.
- Be realistic in setting goals, expectations and objectives; it is counterproductive to set the mark higher than the situation permits.
- Avoid overwork; some tasks are better delegated and others can be left undone until later.
- Take care of themselves first, so that they can go on to take care of others.

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Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress is the reaction to a trauma: a sudden and deeply distressing event that has harmful effects, or a major emotional episode. Examples of traumas that might happen in the field are

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- Witnessing violence, murder, disaster, an accident or epidemic.
- Hearing reports of ill treatment and torture from the victims themselves.
- Being intimidated, threatened, taken hostage.
- Participating in bombing and mining actions or coming under attack.
- Hearing bad news from family or friends.

Peacekeepers are highly likely to encounter one or more of such traumatic situations in a conflict zone. The trauma, sometimes defined as “critical incident stress”, is made all the worse by the peacekeepers’ inability to prevent catastrophe or assist the victims.

If a peacekeeper is stunned and overwhelmed after witnessing a traumatic incident, he or she may undergo burnout or flame-out, or suffer more serious after-effects such as shell shock.

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Emotional reactions to trauma, on the other hand, also vary from one individual to another. The time for emotional reactions to appear and their severity depends on the person’s character and vulnerability. The reaction(s) may appear immediately or after a few hours or days; such a reaction is called “acute stress disorder”. If the reaction(s) appear after a few months, or in rare cases a year or more, the condition is called “post-traumatic stress disorder”.

Post-traumatic stress disorder may be compared to a wound that will not heal naturally. A person who experiences post-traumatic stress disorder should seek professional help from a specialist in psychotherapy and debriefing techniques.

Managing Traumatic Stress

Prevention of stress disorders, or avoiding the worst impacts of trauma, begins with remembering that

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- It is normal to suffer symptoms of extreme stress after a traumatic incident.
- The peacekeeper’s most reliable helpmate is the peacekeeping community, which has borne the full range of traumatic stress over countless conflict situations.

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When the impacts of traumatic stress begin to show themselves, the peacekeeper should

- Not be self-critical or blame him- or herself for being weak.
- Not imagine that others think badly of him- or herself.
- Not suffer in silence; verbalizing emotions helps in working through the experience and preventing more serious effects from setting in.
- Ask for help: talk with someone competent and trustworthy, such as a nurse, medical coordinator, leader or someone trained in debriefing techniques.
- Rest and take time to recover.
- Accept a protective environment provided by those who show they care about you.

Overview — Impacts and Management of Stress

Few people can escape an impact from critical incidents. Reactions may differ considerably — some may show obvious effects, some may be able to hide them. All peacekeepers should accept that their reaction to stress is as individual as all other reactions to physical or emotional situations.

Stress reactions or symptoms can interfere with the ability to cope at work or at home. For a vast majority of peacekeepers, most symptoms tend to diminish in intensity and frequency within a few days or weeks. In some cases, they may last a few months after the event.

Symptoms of Stress

Reactions to stress may be

- **Physical** — for example, feeling fatigue, cold sweats, systematic tremors, elevated blood pressure and increased heart rate with pains.
- **Emotional** — for example, feeling anxious, guilty, sad, defeated and apathetic, angry, irritable, all-powerful, excited and invulnerable, or looking for a scapegoat.
- **Cognitive (mental)** — for example, experiencing temporary confusion, difficulty in concentrating or making decisions, slowing of thought processes, or racing thoughts.
- **Behavioural** — for example, driving dangerously, being hyperactive, having endless discussions and senseless arguments, staying too long in the office.

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The physical symptoms of stress usually are

- Dizziness and nausea
- Increased pulse with a feeling of the heart rushing away
- Sweating episodes.

The emotional symptoms of stress often are:

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- Shock
- Unprovoked anger
- “Swings” and extreme responses (good things seem extraordinarily wonderful while sad things seem profoundly depressing)
- Unprovoked sadness or depression
- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to perform up to expectation.

Normally a person’s emotional state fluctuates between happy and unhappy, being on average “content”. For a mentally healthy individual, every day has its highs and lows.

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Stress reactions can level the highs and lows, so that a stressed person may become emotionally “flat”. The most important warning sign about a “quiet sufferer” is withdrawal — the person becomes a quiet nonentity and is easily overlooked.

Cognitive Symptoms on the Job

Stress can impair job performance, especially such tasks as

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- Concentrating on the tasks at hand.
- Remembering appointments and decisions already made.
- Making new decisions and keeping on track with priorities.

Behavioural Changes

Eating habits may also change. A stressed individual may become afraid of overeating and develop anorexia. Alternatively, he or she may develop an insatiable appetite, caring little about weight changes.

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A normally tidy person may, under stress, become careless about personal hygiene.

Reactions to stress include changes in sociability. The sufferer may feel less like talking with others, preferring silence or withdrawal from company. Peacekeepers should look out for those who suddenly become “invisible” and should find ways to extend support.

Guidelines for Stress Management

The United Nations provides peacekeepers with the guidelines in this module and other resources to help manage stress reactions and avoid negative impacts that occur on the job.

Successful management of stress involves

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- Identifying and analysing the causes and problems of stress.
- Applying the right tools to protect the individual.

Some individuals may not be able to detect subtle changes in their own emotions or behaviour, but may identify them in others. Peacekeepers who identify such changes in themselves or others should seek help or treatment.

Stress management can be practiced at 3 stages:

- Before stress occurs — preparing for stress.
- When the stress occurs — managing stress impacts.
- In the aftermath of the stress — dealing with long-term effects.

Preparing for Stress

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Peacekeepers need to know about the kind of situations they may meet and what they are expected to do there. Officers must share information with their units. Operational and emotional parameters need to be explained to everyone. Planning for and training in how to manage personal stress must be part of those preparations for action. Finally, training should be refreshed and repeated at in-mission sessions.

As with any military operation, peacekeepers must follow up the planning and briefing on stress management with their own preparation. In that way they can be confident that they know enough to respond optimally.

Managing the Impacts

Most effects of stress can be managed according to the methods explained in earlier sections on basic, cumulative and traumatic stress.

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In general, the peacekeeper should keep in mind the approach outlined here below for managing personal stress, or giving support to a colleague feeling stress:

- Identify the injury.
- Practice on-the-spot first aid — talk about the stress experience.
- Take personal initiative — provide treatment for yourself, without waiting for a specialist, using what you understand about stress from this module.
- Monitor the healing process — know when the stress level diminishes.
- Prevent complications (post-traumatic stress) — seek professional help if necessary.

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Patient, sympathetic listening is the most beneficial type of assistance for a psychological wound. It takes time — 2 hours of listening may prevent months of problems down the road for the victim of a traumatic experience.

Sharing with assistance, empathy and listening are all about caring. They are integral to working among peacekeepers in the same mission. Such acts are essential in coping with the stressful reactions that threaten all peacekeepers in the field.

Summary

Stress is a part of our everyday lives. A state of stress prepares us for the “3 F’s” of fright, flight and fight. Stress is useful in many ways. It triggers an informative stimulus in us that is essential for survival and necessary for social development. However, too much stress is detrimental to our emotional and physical well-being and can interfere with our ability to perform tasks.

There are 3 types of stress

- Basic stress
- Cumulative stress
- Traumatic stress.

Peacekeepers are vulnerable to all three kinds of stress and must know how to recognize the symptoms of stress in themselves and in their colleagues and be able to manage the impacts of stress. Peacekeepers should prepare for stress before it occurs, manage the impacts and deal with the long-term effects.

Self-Evaluation Test — Optional

Trainees may evaluate their current state of stress with a self-evaluation test that is reproduced on page 33 of the publication in the digital library entitled *United Nations Stress Management Booklet* (reference 82).

Slides 1-8

Slide 1

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Slide 2 Managing stress



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Slide 3

- ☐ What is stress?
- ☐ Basic stress
- ☐ Cumulative stress
- ☐ Traumatic stress
- ☐ Overview — impacts and management of stress



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Slide 4 Signs of stress

- ☐ Physical, physiological
- ☐ Mental, psychological



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Slide 5 Getting ready for

- ☐ Fright
- ☐ Flight
- ☐ Fight



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Slide 6 Stress is informative

- ☐ Essential for survival
- ☐ Necessary for social development
- ☐ Useful in other ways
- ☐ Addictive
- ☐ Manageable



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Slide 7

- ☐ Basic stress
- ☐ Cumulative stress
- ☐ Traumatic stress



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Slide 8 Influences

- ☐ Preceding situation
- ☐ Past experience
- ☐ Education, training
- ☐ Professional skills
- ☐ Age
- ☐ Physical fitness
- ☐ Self-confidence
- ☐ Spiritual outlook



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Slides 9-16

Slide 9 Basic stress from

- ☐ No control
- ☐ Threatening surroundings
- ☐ Limited sleep, privacy
- ☐ No challenge
- ☐ Dull diet
- ☐ No fun
- ☐ Little family contact



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Slide 10 Managing basic stress

- ☐ Identify sources
- ☐ Know limits
- ☐ Manage time
- ☐ Sleep enough
- ☐ Eat regularly
- ☐ Don't abuse alcohol, tobacco
- ☐ Take rest, exercise
- ☐ Enjoy friendships
- ☐ Nurture positive attitudes
- ☐ Laugh often



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Slide 11 Cumulative stress from

- ☐ High frequency
- ☐ Long duration
- ☐ High intensity



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Slide 12 Burnout

- ☐ Changes attitudes
- ☐ Avoids work
- ☐ Or, becomes totally immersed
- ☐ Develops negative outlook



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Slide 13 Flame-out

- ☐ Exhaustion, hyperactivity
- ☐ Overwhelming negative emotions
- ☐ Denial of symptoms
- ☐ Loss of objectivity



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Slide 14 Managing cumulative stress

- ☐ Take responsibility
- ☐ Learn to accept
- ☐ Set realistic goals
- ☐ Avoid overwork
- ☐ Take care of self first



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Slide 15 Traumatic stress from

- ☐ Violence, disaster
- ☐ Victims' reports
- ☐ Intimidation, threats
- ☐ Bombing, attacks
- ☐ Bad news from home



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- ☐ Burnout
- ☐ Flame-out
- ☐ Shell shock
- ☐ Acute stress disorder
- ☐ Post-traumatic stress disorder



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Slides 17-24

Slide 17 *Avoid disorders by*

- ☐ **Accepting stress as normal**
- ☐ **Relying on community**



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Slide 18 *Preventing post-traumatic stress disorder*

- ☐ **Don't be self-critical**
- ☐ **Don't imagine others think badly**
- ☐ **Don't suffer in silence: verbalize**
- ☐ **Talk with competent colleague**
- ☐ **Rest — take time to recover**
- ☐ **Accept protective environment**



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Slide 19 *Physical symptoms*

- ☐ **Dizziness**
- ☐ **Racing pulse**
- ☐ **Sweating**



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Slide 20 *Emotional symptoms*

- ☐ **Shock**
- ☐ **Anger**
- ☐ **Exaggerated emotions**
- ☐ **Depression**
- ☐ **Overwhelmed**



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Normal = content

Stressed = unhappy or “flat”



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Slide 22 *Cognitive symptoms*

- ☐ **Erratic concentration**
- ☐ **Forgetfulness**
- ☐ **Impaired decision-making**



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Slide 23 *Stress can change*

- ☐ **Eating habits**
- ☐ **Personal hygiene**
- ☐ **Social habits**



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Slide 24

- ☐ **Recognize problems**
- ☐ **Apply guidelines**
- ☐ **Seek support**



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Slides 25-27

Slide 25 *Preparing*

- ☐ Learn what to expect
- ☐ Plan how to handle it



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Slide 26 *Managing*

- ☐ Identify the injury
- ☐ Give first aid — talk
- ☐ Provide treatment (for basic, cumulative, traumatic stress)
- ☐ Monitor healing
- ☐ Seek professional help



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Slide 27 *Coping with caring*

- ☐ Listening
- ☐ Sharing



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