BEST PRACTICES FOR WELL-BEING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

LIFELINE

FOR EMBATTLED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The following information is an excerpt from the Lifeline Toolkit for CSOs in Restrictive Space (www.csolifeline.org/advocacy-toolkit).

An integrated approach to security also includes attention to mental health. In addition to being important in its own right, attention to well-being ensures organizational sustainability and that your team is in the right headspace to make good decisions about their security and work. A lack of attention to well-being takes a significant toll on frontline human rights defenders, organizations, and movements. Human rights campaigning can involve exposure to a great deal of stress, trauma, and secondary trauma. That, combined with working in harrowing, restrictive environments under fear of attack is extremely stressful. Activists with different identities may also face different types of challenges that affect wellbeing, for example, a defender's gender and/or sexual identity could put them under additional threat.

With that in mind it's very important to think about you and your team's well-being and psycho-social health in order to reduce burnout and mitigate the impact of trauma and secondary trauma. The most important place to start is organizational and leadership commitment to well-being at the highest levels —managers and senior staff play important roles in setting the tone for an organization and modeling good well-being practices. Some advocates see attending to well-being as part of their political vision commitment, rather than relegating it to a medicalized model of mental health.

There are many barriers to addressing mental health issues – cultural stigma, lack of awareness, lack of financial resources, and poor management—but there are also a lot creative responses to deal with the barriers. In contexts where there are few mental health professionals and individualized therapy is not widely accepted or accessible, peer-to-peer support is a highly effective way to deal with stress and trauma. While every context is unique, below are some suggestions based on a **study on organizational responses to mental health risks in the human rights field** conducted by the **Human Rights Resilience project at New York University**.

- **Providing education, training, and resources:** Periodic or one-off workshops, incorporating mental health education into existing staff meetings or retreats, or providing written guides or tips to advocates.

- **Mainstreaming Attention to Well-being into Individual, Team, and Organizational Meetings:** Discussion of well-being in regular staff meetings can open space to vent harms or stress and encourage well-being practices.

- **Counseling and Psychological Support:** Organizations can provide or facilitate access to therapy or counseling; these could be individual and/or group therapy sessions. Some organizations make counselors available at the office; others provided financial resources for staff to access them elsewhere.

- **Peer Support and Socializing:** One of the most common and effective measures is the use of peer support mechanisms. This can include specific efforts to encourage peer-to-peer mental health support, as well as more general efforts to create opportunities for socializing and building inter-staff trust and bonds.

- **Shifting Topic or Type of Work:** Shifting the topic or type of work, including taking a break from direct work with witnesses and survivors, can help prevent or respond to burnout or secondary trauma.

- **Trauma-Aware Workflows:** Organizations can adopt workflow practices to mitigate harm, including recommendations that advocates not process graphic material at night or alone, break up exposure into discrete time periods, and block out parts of a graphic image.

- **Breaks and Leave:** Many advocates discussed the importance of breaks, and numerous organizations had various formal or informal break and leave policies focused on enhancing well-being.

- **Remote Working and Flexible Hours:** These can aid advocates in managing their workloads and personal responsibilities and facilitate working in varied or less-stressful environments.

- **Offering Individual Well-being Practices:** Some organizations offer or facilitate practices such as yoga, mindfulness, or exercise.

- **Art, Spiritual, and Religiously Rooted Healing Practices:** Advocates identified artistic, spiritual, or religiously rooted practices that aimed at individual at individual or collective care and healing.

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