

WHO HAS MY BACK?

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The coronavirus (which causes the disease officially named COVID-19) has been declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO), which often brings feelings of uncertainty, fear, anxiety and worry to many of us and to our families. It can also lead to changes in mood and behavior. Some may experience a need to “do something” but you don’t know what to do. Others may feel a low mood and feel sad or hopeless.

Having a perceived sense of safety is necessary for all of us to function well in the world. This is due to the brain’s prioritizing survival and safety above everything else. As discussed in another article, the protective emergency response, while always ready, only takes over when any uncertainty is felt. Uncertainty shifts the brain out of its normal thinking patterns to the primitive survival response as our perceived safety is in doubt, whether it be in the physical, social, financial, or psychological sphere. This results in more emotional and erratic responses as our thinking brain is essentially off line.

Covid-19 is unique in this century as it is threatening all spheres for all people globally. The degree of uncertainty is rampant as medical researchers scramble to understand the behavior of the virus and governments have vacillated in their responses and often put out misinformation. In a brain sense, the whole of the human population is operating from the more primitive survival response as it struggles to perceive some kind of safety. Our humanitarian community is no exception to this even though many of you are familiar with operating in risky, uncertain environments. From the C-Suite to the local driver, we all have been effected by the uncertainty bred by Covid-19.

Depending on who you are in your organization your heightened desire to secure safety may have a different focus. Boards and executives may find themselves focusing on the survival of the organization and making decisions based on this overall goal. Those in the field may be scrambling to ensure the safety of the beneficiaries they know as well as their own personal safety. Managers in between may find themselves unable to find a way to protect the organization as well as their field staff, much less themselves. This has all led to the exacerbation of a perennial issue I have observed in the humanitarian community: ***Who has my back?***

For many years in trainings I have referred to feeling that your back has been exposed as being experienced as a betrayal. This is one of the most damaging of psychological experiences. I have seen robust, highly resilient individuals used to operating in high risk situations drop to their knees when they have felt abandoned by their organization, colleagues, or even beneficiaries. This feeling of betrayal strikes at the core of who we are as an attachment species. Trusting others is essential to our well



being. It can take years to build and only a moment to be broken. As agencies understandably attempt to manage donors, maintain viability, and keep a presence in beneficiary communities their staff may feel a heightened pressure to forgo their own needs and those of their families. An old wound is being exacerbated with unfortunate consequences for all. Whose back gets covered - beneficiaries, staff, donors, the board? Whose trust is broken in a situation where it is impossible to cover everyone's back simultaneously? As the pandemic intensifies this impossible dilemma is being felt throughout the aid system.

So what can the humanitarian community do in this situation?

1. Try to make decisions from the most rational part of your brain. In a previous article on Managing Emotions in a Pandemic, I outlined how our brain operates in a time of uncertainty and how to down regulate our more primitive survival response. The recommendations there are not magic, but they can help.
2. Realize that all levels in aid organizations are struggling to have a coherent response. Extend compassion to yourself and others who may have different priorities and make different decisions than you. The usual undercurrent of humanitarian machismo needs to be lessened rather than heightened during this crisis. You don't know all the particulars of a colleague's or manager's situation. Try to give them the benefit of the doubt, however difficult this is to do. Burning in resentment is not going to help you during this time.
3. For staff on the front lines one of the principles taught in HEAT may be helpful to consider. My training colleague, Andries Dryer, emphasizes that when there is an imminent threat to your life, you become your own 'national director'. While Covid-19 is not an AK-47, its effect might be as tragic, depending on the personal vulnerabilities and age or yourself or your family members. Each individual circumstance is different but I believe the new realities have to figure into your threat/risk analysis. Only you and your family can make the best decision.
4. Seek guidance and comfort from trusted friends and colleagues. We are a community. More than any other kind of human organization the humanitarian community understands reaching out with compassion. Let's now do this for each other.

For more information or counseling support please email: support@headington-institute.org.