

When Purpose Feels Uncertain: Navigating Well-Being in a Humanitarian Sector in Crisis

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Introduction

For many, working in humanitarian aid is not just a job; it is a calling. It is built on the belief that change is possible, that suffering can be alleviated, and that service to others is one of the most meaningful ways to spend a life. But what happens when the sector itself is in crisis? When funding dries up, programs are cut, and organizations that once carried out life-saving work are forced to scale back or disappear altogether?

The humanitarian sector is facing one of its most challenging periods in recent history. From widespread aid freezes to significant budget reductions, the landscape is shifting, leaving professionals in limbo. Programs that have been in place for years are being abruptly discontinued, leaving communities without critical support and aid workers questioning their future. For those whose identity and purpose are closely tied to this work, the impact is profound.

This moment requires not just professional adaptation but personal resilience. The emotional toll of watching an industry that once gave you purpose beginning to unravel can feel overwhelming. The challenge now is not just how to continue serving but how to care for yourself in the process.

The Emotional and Psychological Impact of an Industry in Crisis

Many aid workers describe their role as more than a career; it is a deeply ingrained part of who they are. When that foundation begins to crack, it can trigger a range of emotional responses:

- **Grief and loss.** The closure of programs and loss of funding can feel deeply personal, as though the work and impact made no difference.

- **Moral distress.** Watching communities lose essential services while being unable to intervene can lead to guilt and feelings of helplessness.
- **Identity crisis.** Many in the sector define themselves by their work. Without it, they struggle to understand who they are outside of their role.
- **Survivor's guilt.** Those who keep their jobs may feel guilt over colleagues who were laid off or projects that were discontinued.
- **Burnout and exhaustion.** The pressure to do more with fewer resources, or to secure alternative funding, can lead to overwhelming stress.

It is essential to acknowledge these emotions rather than dismiss them as part of the job. Humanitarian work has always been emotionally demanding, but these challenges add new layers of stress that require attention and care.

Practical Strategies for Navigating Uncertainty

While the sector's challenges are largely beyond individual control, there are intentional steps that aid workers can take to maintain their well-being and find new ways to stay connected to their purpose.

1. Give Yourself Permission to Grieve

Change, even necessary or inevitable change, can be painful. Losing a role, a program, or even just the sense of stability you once had is a real loss. Allow yourself to process it. Talk about it with trusted colleagues. Write about it. Recognize that feeling anger, sadness, or frustration is a natural response to watching something you deeply care about shift or disappear.

2. Shift Focus from Loss to Legacy

The work you have done still matters. Even if a project ends, the impact remains. Instead of focusing only on what is lost, reflect on the lives you have touched, the skills you have built, and the change you have contributed to. If you find yourself in transition, consider mentoring younger professionals or using your experience to support emerging organizations that are still active.

3. Take Control Where You Can

One of the most distressing aspects of this uncertainty is the sense of powerlessness. Reclaiming control in small ways can help rebuild stability. Update

your resume. Identify skills you want to develop. Explore opportunities outside the traditional humanitarian framework, such as advocacy, policy work, or community-based initiatives.

4. Create a Contingency Plan

Even if your job feels secure today, funding cycles are unpredictable. Think about a plan for different scenarios—what you would do if your program ends, where you might find alternative opportunities, and what support systems you can lean on. Having a plan does not mean you expect the worst; it means you are prepared for whatever comes next.

5. Strengthen Your Personal and Professional Networks

Isolation can magnify stress. Stay connected with colleagues, mentors, and industry peers. Reach out to those who may also be struggling and support each other. Networking is not just about finding new opportunities; it is also about maintaining a sense of community in an industry that thrives on connection.

6. Set Boundaries and Prevent Overwork

When job security feels uncertain, there is often pressure to overwork to prove value. This is not sustainable. Establish clear boundaries between work and personal time, and recognize that your worth is not tied to the number of hours you put in.

7. Prioritize Mental and Physical Well-Being

The stress of industry instability can manifest physically and emotionally. Make space for restorative practices, including exercise, sleep, nutrition, mindfulness, or simply stepping away from work when you need a break. Resilience is not about pushing through exhaustion; it is about sustaining yourself for the long term.

8. Reimagine What Purpose Looks Like

If the traditional humanitarian aid landscape is shifting, what other ways can you stay engaged? Community organizing, social entrepreneurship, and advocacy work are just a few areas where humanitarian values are still needed. Consider broadening your view of what it means to make an impact.

Finding the Path Forward

The humanitarian sector is in flux, but the need for humanitarian values and action remains constant. The challenge now is learning how to adapt while preserving the core of what led you to this work in the first place.

Your purpose has not disappeared; it is evolving. And as it does, taking care of your own well-being is just as important as the work itself. The future of humanitarian aid will depend not just on funding and policies, but on the resilience of those who remain committed to serving in whatever capacity they can.

If you are struggling with uncertainty, you are not alone. Many are navigating the same questions, the same challenges, and the same fears. The key is to walk through this period with intention, supporting yourself just as you have supported others.