

STILLPOINTENGAGE in depth, in the field.



ResiliencEngage™: Fostering the Inner Resources of Humanitarian Aid Workers

Stillpoint Engage presents *ResiliencEngage*, a program designed to support Humanitarian Aid Workers (HAWs) as they provide relief and alleviate suffering in vulnerable and crisis-affected communities worldwide.

At Stillpoint Engage, we work to alleviate human suffering in underserved and post-conflict communities through the application of depth psychological principles.

- 1. We engage directly with underserved and post-conflict communities, promoting psychological and social support activities both within and outside of formal mental-health contexts.*
- 2. We facilitate increased psychosocial resilience for Humanitarian Aid Workers, thereby strengthening the impact of their field work in communities worldwide.*
- 3. We provide opportunities for actionable insight into the manifold root causes of human suffering through quantitative and qualitative research, curated discussion and debate, and innovative community and professional education.*

In all our initiatives, Stillpoint Engage creates opportunities to apply humanistic insight in support of individual and community healing in an increasingly unstable world.

Background and Introduction from Jane Reilly, Co-Founder and Executive Director

My inspiration to create *ResiliencEngage* began in the late 1990s while working with refugees and asylees in New York City. Many of my colleagues at this time had recently returned from conflict zones—the Bosnian War and civil wars in Sierra Leone, Algeria and Liberia, among others. I witnessed their distress upon re-entry alongside their commitment to continuing their essential humanitarian work. Years later, while in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as Clinical Lead supporting returnees (internally displaced persons and refugees who had been displaced by the war returning to their home villages from UNHCR run refugee camps), I encountered a stark reality: with limited resources and a lack of clear guidelines, nonprofit organizations necessarily focus their efforts on those they are committed to serve.

These limitations, however, often inadvertently result in a fundamental lack of psychosocial support for the field workers themselves, the women and men who carry out the organizations’

missions. Stillpoint Engage's *ResiliencEngage* exists to support both the field workers and their organizations so that they can focus on the work they do best and continue to serve those in need.

Background and Need

Today humanitarian aid organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent a sizeable force for social change, providing direct and indirect services to millions of people throughout the world.

Stillpoint Engage is embedded in a global constellation of mission-driven organizations that straddle the West Coast and Midwest regions of the United States, with sites also in London, Paris, Zurich, and Berlin. Stillpoint Engage is the humanitarian action arm of this psychology-focused network, bringing innovations in mental health to the people and places where it's needed most. Affiliated organizations in the United States include [PrairieCare](#) in Minnesota and [Bay Area Clinical Associates](#) in California, both of which provide clinical mental health care services. Our other affiliate is [Stillpoint Spaces](#), a vibrant international community of clinicians and non-clinicians who meet virtually and in-person to explore psychology in-depth, both inside and outside the consulting room.

There are approximately 3,900 humanitarian NGOs around the globe that are recognized partners of the United Nations, with approximately one-third of them located in the United States. Within these organizations there are nearly 250,000 individual aid workers, each carrying out a variety of duties and responsibilities and all connected by a common purpose: to find solutions to the most difficult international problems, including human rights, humanitarian relief, international migration of refugees, food securities, reducing human suffering, and achieving international peace. These humanitarian aid workers share in the extreme conditions and stressors of the people with whom they work, and their repeated exposure to traumatic events impacts their wellbeing and mental health. In turn, this exposure negatively impacts their relationships with the people with whom they work and, in turn, their ability to serve to their fullest ability. For example, Ager et al., report that 68%, 53%,

and 26% of national humanitarian aid workers in Gulu, Uganda, experienced symptom levels associated with high risk for depression, anxiety disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), respectively¹. Cardoza et al., also show increased risk for depression and burnout among humanitarian aid workers after they returned from deployment, lasting at least 3–6 months². At the same time, Dunkley reports that only 20% of aid workers surveyed felt adequate psychosocial support was being offered³. There is a documented need to build the resilience of humanitarian aid workers – that is, to enhance their ability to tolerate high-stress environments while maintaining an awareness of their surroundings and both their physical and mental wellbeing. With increased resilience comes increased stamina, an increased ability to make difficult decisions under pressure, an increased ability to stay present with others, and the strength to bounce back from adversity. With resilience comes the ability to fully embrace the humanity of others, as well as the ability to serve in a sustainable way.

Program Description

ResiliencEngage is designed to cultivate and support the resilience of humanitarian aid workers prior to, during, and after their field deployments. *ResiliencEngage* equips HAWs with both the skills and tools they need to unpack the dynamic ways in which their own beliefs and identities, along with myriad human and environmental structures, impact their work and relationships with communities in crisis. Building on this foundation of awareness, *ResiliencEngage* enables HAWs to cultivate resilience to the stressors of their work and life in the field. Unlike other training and support resources for HAWs, which are often static and delivered on-site at NGO facilities via employee assistance programs or in-person interactions with medical providers, *ResiliencEngage* leverages technology to deliver in-depth online trainings, a tailored phone app with resilience resources (e.g., self-assessments, recommended reset activities, and virtual peer support groups), and connection to virtual clinical supports prior to, during, and post-assignment.

ResiliencEngage delivers these trainings, resources, and supports in three integrated stages: *ResiliencEngage* Training, the *ResiliencEngage* App, and the *Healthy Return* program.

ResiliencEngage Training is an online, classroom-based program that prepares humanitarian aid workers for multiple field appointments and allows for ongoing psychosocial support across their careers. Designed by subject matter experts, *ResiliencEngage* training modules are integrated into HAW orientation before their deployment(s). Utilizing state of the art distance-based learning methods, HAWs engage in real-time, virtual interactions, including lectures, large and small group discussions, role-plays, and case studies. Training modules focus on topics such as the neurobiology of stress, stress resilience (burnout), the impact of trauma, and the unique stressors associated with returning home from the field, among others. A clinician with field-experience delivers the *ResiliencEngage*[™] curriculum to cohorts of approximately 20 HAWs and will continue to convene and facilitate virtual monthly peer support meetings with the cohort while they are in the field and up to 6 months post reentry.

The *ResiliencEngage* App is the cornerstone resource for humanitarian aid workers in the field. A dynamic, self-directed support, the app reinforces stress resilience strategies taught via the classroom-based training and connects the user to resources and tools to enable ongoing resilience practices. At the core of the app is a self-assessment that is taken by the humanitarian aid worker at least once each week throughout their field assignment. The results of this self-assessment triggers one of many situationally appropriate reset activities contained within the app, such as relaxation techniques, heart rate variability, meditation guidance, instruction on body awareness practices, video tutorials, and inspirational videos from subject matter experts.

If a HAW is in distress at the time of the self-assessment, an alert will be sent to their assigned clinician (cohort leader). The cohort leader will then reach out to the aid worker with one-on-one support. The *ResiliencEngage* app also provides social and digital media platforms for facilitated monthly check-in calls where members of the cohort receive support from their

peers in the field, around the world. HAWs can continue to have access to these resources and opportunities for connection upon reentry and months following.

Finally, field workers can utilize an app-delivered *Healthy Return* module that includes resilience resources designed to deepen and extend the tools and practices they've cultivated in the previous *ResiliencEngage* stages. HAWs are also able to work with their dedicated support clinician to integrate their experiences into the fabric of their post-HAW lives, and from there, make meaning from their experiences. Research suggests that 60% of field workers experience psychological distress upon re-entry. *ResiliencEngage* aims to reduce this number significantly by providing a protective resilience barrier.

Outcomes

Ultimately, the success of *ResiliencEngage* is measured by overall improvements in humanitarian aid worker mental health, reduced burnout, improved relationships among HAW teams and with the people they serve, and a healthy return. Further, *ResiliencEngage* has the capacity to provide the international aid community with a continuous stream of detailed, real-time data on aid worker resilience worldwide. Such a rich data source has the potential to revolutionize the aid delivery environment, providing evidence with which to enhance humanitarian aid worker training and deployment systems, maximize aid worker efficiency and improve HAW work-force retention and job satisfaction. In the long term, we expect *ResiliencEngage* to become a standard component of NGO human resource and risk management systems that is purchased for employees in the same manner as is currently done with international travel and safety security insurance, health care benefits, and other support systems.

Conclusion

We know that many humanitarian aid workers return home with psychological distress. Following my field experience in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I carried home symptoms of PTSD which required healing attention. Drawing on my personal experience and insights, I arrived at a deeper understanding of the kind of comprehensive approach that would be necessary to sustain the health and wellbeing of humanitarian aid workers. I have been heartened to discover that I am not alone, as revealed by numerous research studies, as well as guidelines like those articulated by the Antares Foundation, which outlines the need for a multifaceted approach in line with what my team is undertaking. I have spent years in leadership alongside my therapeutic work and understand the systemic challenges for NGOs. Over time, my commitment to support humanitarian aid workers has only grown. I am proud to lead a team of experts – scientists, technologists, mental health professionals, spiritual teachers, humanitarian aid workers, and refugees – to build a more resilient pool of humanitarian aid workers, and a more sustainable and effective model for humanitarian aid worldwide.

References

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