The impact of working in a border control environment

Protection Training Manual for European Border and Entry Officials

Session 4
Debriefing Part II
The complexity of working in border control areas

- Psychological strain of people working with victims of trauma and “persons in need”: typical for humanitarian workers

- Additional constraints in the case of border guards:
  - Overwhelming task of stemming irregular migration flows into Europe
  - Dealing with fundamental rights at the same time as having to “seal” the borders
  - Often under fire by NGOs, media or political parties
  - Not typical policing:
    - border areas are unpredictable,
    - unresourced (particularly arrival “hot spots”),
    - lack of clear standard operating procedures to apply international law.
The psychological reactions

1. Compensate for challenges by working harder, faster and better

2. Tiredness and burn-out:
   - Cannot cope with level of work: take distance from distressed areas or persons
   - Communication diminishes

3. Transfer of problem to “the other”:
   - To the institution
   - To the migrants / asylum-seekers

4. Protecting the sense of “self”:
   - “Everything is going fine”
   - Lack of constructive self-criticism that enables improvement.
Striving towards a healthy approach:

- See individual actions as part of a coherent chain of actions: maintain links with national referral institutions, UNHCR, NGOs, etc.

- Limit focus of attention to the reality right in front of you: the needs of THAT individual (not of migration control nor of all arriving individuals).

- Other practical measures:
  - Rotation from “hot spot” to more stable ones;
  - Ongoing psychological support and peer-support;
  - Regular annual leave.