

Help for the Helpers:

Caring for Yourself when Assisting Others

Helping members of your community who have been through a traumatic experience can be very rewarding, but it also can take a toll on you both personally and professionally. While it's important to recognize the occupational hazards of assisting others, it's also important to remember that through regular self-care practices, the benefits of trauma work can outweigh the potential risks. How well do you take care of yourself? You can only be a competent helper if you're not stressed out personally, so your commitment to self-care and wellness is actually an ethical and professional responsibility. Of course this may be difficult to do immediately after a major event when demands are extreme, but it's essential to at least monitor your own stress level and practice self-care as much as you can. The following are some ways to make sure you're taking care of yourself so you can continue to take care of others.

Rewards and Risks of Helping

Each helper experiences a unique combination of rewards from this kind of work, such as a feeling of personal growth and self-awareness, a belief one is serving one's faith, or a sense of emotional connection with survivors and the community. What is it that keeps YOU motivated to help those in need? One source of self-care is to be aware of the rewards and satisfactions you receive from this work – and to be conscious of signs that the costs of caring are starting to outweigh those rewards.

There are two main occupational hazards to be aware of. In the first, referred to as **Burnout** or **Compassion Fatigue** (a term more specific to the helping professions), workers continuously overextend their capacity to aid others and become emotionally exhausted by the work. This can limit their ability to be effective helpers, but it can usually be cured by taking a break and practicing effective coping methods like those described below. The second main hazard, referred to as **Vicarious Traumatization** or **Secondary Traumatic Stress**, can be far more serious. In this case, intense or repeated exposure to clients' stories of traumatic experiences can impact the helper as if he or she suffered the traumatic event personally. This can take a serious emotional toll, changing one's beliefs about fairness, justice, or good and evil in the world.

Anyone who is committed to helping trauma survivors may be vulnerable to these occupational hazards, especially if:

- You are exposed to multiple trauma and grief experiences
- The trauma causes injuries, death, or grotesque images or sounds
- The trauma impacts children
- There are many chronic stressors
- You have your own unresolved trauma or grief reactions from current or past losses
- You feel helpless to assist others

Warning Signs for Occupational Hazards

Losing your sense of humor, being unable to balance a personal life with your work life, or thinking you cannot be replaced should be seen as warning signs in addition to the signs listed below. It's often harder to spot these signs in ourselves than it is for other people to recognize them, so be sure to listen to colleagues or loved ones who suggest you seem upset or stressed out or are not acting like yourself.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Emotional</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Powerlessness • Sadness • Helplessness • Depression • Mood swings 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Health</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • GI distress • Fatigue or exhaustion • Susceptibility to illness • Muscular aches 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Behaviors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep changes • Irritability • Hypervigilance • Appetite changes • Substance use 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Workplace</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance • Tardiness • Absenteeism • Lack of motivation or initiative
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Relationships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal/Isolation • Decreased intimacy • Mistrust • Misplaced anger • Over-protectiveness 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Thoughts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorientation • Perfectionism • Problems concentrating • Thoughts of harm • Rigidity 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spirituality</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of purpose • Anger with your God • Loss of faith • Questioning meaning/ purpose of life and beliefs 	

Self-Care and Effective Stress Management

What can you do to prevent the risks and to maximize the rewards of helping others? The core of self-care is effective stress management, which requires continuous attention. **Good stress management activities both improve the way you feel *and* allow you to function more effectively.** Ineffective activities (like eating or smoking too much, or bullying people around you) might make you feel better temporarily, but they do not help you function in the long run.

The best self-care strategies include activities that you will actually do – not unrealistic goals you can't meet. It's also very difficult to start using new coping methods during the stress of a major event, so your best strategy at this time is to examine your current coping mechanisms and determine which are effective, which are not, and what you might do to increase the helpful ones.

The following are some strategies that are often recommended, but the most important point is to **know what works for you, and when you're stressed, remember to do it or do more of it.**

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get sufficient sleep• Take regular breaks• Exercise• Eat a balanced diet• Connect with others• Have some time alone• Pray or follow your other usual spiritual practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take the time off that you are given• Balance giving and receiving support• Pay attention to the early warning signs of stress• Utilize a self-care 'buddy' system• Balance work, play, and rest• Limit TV and internet exposure
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Some of the strategies listed may not be realistic at certain times in an emergency, but could be used later. Other strategies might be used from the start. For example, at the very beginning of a response you should not go home after working and watch television covering the event. You need a break! You should also remember that you have no obligation to speak to the media, however persistent their requests.

Barriers to Self-Care: There are many barriers to self-care, and many helpers tend to neglect their own needs while helping others. In emergency situations, there may be a lack of resources, time, or adequate supervision. The needs of community members can seem so great that your needs may seem small by comparison, and if others are suffering, you might feel guilty if you attend to your own needs. It's essential that you accept your own limits and do not see yourself as irreplaceable in the relief operation as that can quickly lead to burnout.

And remember: Caring for yourself while helping others does not make you selfish or needy. The care that helpers provide others can only be as good as the care they provide themselves.

