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 is important to recognize the occupational hazards of assisting others, it is 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 are not stressed out personally, so your commitment to self-care and wellness is actually an ethical and professional responsibility. The following are some ways to make sure you are 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 sense of emotional connection with survivors and the community, and pride in overcoming difficult challenges during times of crisis and chaos. 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. Fortunately good self-care can help prevent this reaction from occurring.

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 (ongoing) stressors
- You have your own unresolved trauma or grief reactions from current or past losses
- You feel helpless to assist others or to save lives

Additionally, especially in the event of large-scale disasters, helpers often need to tolerate a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty. In many cases you may not know the outcome of contact with those you are trying to help, which can add professional stress.
**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 is 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.

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**Self-Care and Effective Stress Management**
Now that you are aware of the potential hazards of helping, here is what you can do to prevent the risks and to maximize the rewards. 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.

And effective activities should be a part of your daily routine, not something that is practiced only once in a while, or postponed until you really need it. This means that good self-care strategies include activities that you will actually do, every day – not unrealistic goals you cannot meet. It is very difficult to start using new coping methods during the stress of a disaster or major event, so getting into good coping habits in advance will help you be more prepared for the challenges you will face in traumatic events. That will make you more likely to adapt quickly and fully to challenges and recover from their potentially negative effects. So, your first step should be 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 develop practices you will actually use: **Know what works for you, and when you are stressed, remember to do it or do more of it.**

- Get sufficient sleep
- Take regular breaks
- Exercise
- Eat a balanced diet
- Connect with others
- Have some time alone
- Limit TV and internet exposure
- Pray or follow your other usual spiritual practices

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| • Take the time off that you are given
• Balance giving and receiving support
• Draw upon your personal self-care plan
• Pay attention to the early warning signs of stress
• Utilize a self-care ‘buddy’ system
• Balance work, play, and rest
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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!

It can also be helpful to discuss your plan with family, friends, and colleagues so they can support you, and to have a logistical plan for the practical issues that may arise during an event. For example, if you are called on to work long hours after a disaster, who will care for your children or attend to other needs? Having a plan in place in advance will reduce your personal stress if something does happen, allowing you to function better professionally.

**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 clients 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 is essential that you accept your own limits and do not see yourself as unable to be replaced 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.**
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