

Self-care Primer for Trauma Helpers

This primer was created for all those helping survivors of traumatic events. Included are mental health professionals, medical professionals and all rescue and recovery workers. There are several points covered below—do not expect all of them to apply to you. Please take what is useful for you and disregard what is not.

Preventing and alleviating “compassion fatigue”

- First and foremost, you must take care of yourself as much as possible. Remember, if you don't take care of your own basic needs, you will not be able to care for others in the long run. If you burn out, who will take your place? In some situations this will be more possible than in others, but you must do the best you can!
 - Get adequate sleep.
 - Eat regular meals.
 - Take breaks.
 - Get exercise: run, walk, lift weights.
 - Talk with family and friends often.
- In a crisis, you may be working seven days a week; however, as soon as possible reduce your work week to four to five days. What you are doing is so demanding and exhausting, you absolutely need time to rest and take care of basic things.
- Carry your resources with you in your mind, and with pictures or small objects that remind you of them. Create comforting images of favorite people, places and activities. Take mini-breaks frequently to call up these images in as much detail as possible. You need to remember you have a life and pleasures separate from the distressing (albeit valuable) work you are doing.
- Accentuate the positive. Rather than focusing most of your thoughts on the tragedy at hand, spend blocks of time thinking about the good you and the other helpers are doing. Pay attention to how many lives you are helping and saving more than how many were lost or destroyed.

Preventing and alleviating vicarious traumatization

When a helper "catches" the trauma of those being helped, vicarious trauma can develop. There are some simple things you can do to reduce your risk and possibly prevent this:

- Remember that you are not a victim, you are a helper. That means you have strength and resources available to use to assist others who do not have those abilities right now.
- You may feel "survivor guilt" that you have not suffered as much as those you are assisting. It is critical to remember that if you had, you would not be in a position to help!
- When hearing survivor stories, or when reflecting on your work, it is common to consciously or unconsciously create visual or auditory images of what has happened to the victims, or to try to feel what it was like. This can actually be very harmful to you. Such imagery is a major factor in vicarious trauma because it makes you feel like a victim and/or eye witness. When possible, avoid the creation of such images and states. Instead, create other images—neutral or pleasant—to keep up your mood and strength.

If you find that visual and/or auditory images are inevitable, you can learn to control them. Try putting the visual image on a “screen” and the auditory ones on a “tape player” in your mind. Then practice manipulating the controls. For visual images, change the size and distance of the screen.

Slow down the action and speed it up. Change the color mix to black and white or sepia, etc. For auditory images, speed it up and slow it down, change the pitch, add in other sounds that might not belong; if there are speakers, change their voices. The idea is for you to learn that these are 100 percent your images and you can control them rather than feeling victimized by them.

- As much as possible, avoid over-identifying with the people you are assisting. Internal language like, "That could have been me," "What if that happened to my child (parent, sister, etc.)?" "How could I ... if ..." etc. will all make your job harder. Remember, the advantage you have as a helper right now is that it did NOT happen to you. Because of that you have resources to help. Over-identification could risk sapping those resources.

If you continue to have difficulty with compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma, seek professional help.

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