

# SELF-CARE FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS DURING DISASTERS.

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Regularly using methods of self-care is important for healthcare workers on a daily basis, but is especially important during disasters. Stress can be motivating and can contribute better performance, but if not managed correctly, it can cause problems.

Working during disasters is work that can be powerful, and can have a great impact. It can be challenging in ways that are different to the situations in your regular work. Using self-care techniques will help to maintain your standards of work. This is important during disasters, where you may not be able to use your normal methods of self-care, and it can be easily overlooked.

# REASONS WHY SELF-CARE IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT DURING DISASTERS:

Disasters are almost always sudden and unexpected events

Your work environment may be overwhelming and/or overstimulating

You may be working longer hours than normal

You may be working under difficult conditions with fewer resources

You may encounter a lot of confusion

There may be difficult choices to make

The organisational structure may be different to what you are used to

It is easy to become so involved in your work of caring for others that you may forget to take care of yourself. Professionals responding to a disaster may also find that they are expected to be calm and able to manage people experiencing high levels of distress, but professionals can be just as vulnerable to emotional stress as anybody else.

## **FAILING TO ATTEND TO SELF-CARE CAN LEAD TO INEFFECTIVE AND UNFORTUNATE PRACTICES**

A decline in  
performance level

Number of mistakes increases

Problem-solving  
capacity decreases

Physical health declines

Quality of life can deteriorate

Burnout/compassion fatigue

PTSD

## **BURNOUT**

Burnout is a term commonly used to describe the accumulative results of work related stress with inadequate support. It develops over time, and is associated with a decrease in work satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and emotional disconnection. Burnout is more common in people who are exposed to high numbers of traumatic incidents with little time between to properly recover.

Compassion fatigue results from stress that comes from caring for traumatised people. It is characterised by a sense of disconnection to others, while at the same time feeling the strain of their emotional problems. It can result in avoiding dealing with problems, emotional numbing, or feeling like you are on high alert.

## **COMPASSION FATIGUE**

## **PTSD**

Post-traumatic stress disorder occurs when a person experiences traumatic events, and their emotional response was fear or helplessness. Symptoms can include depression, anxiety, insomnia, intense worry, avoidance behaviours and/or hyperarousal. It may also involve the recurring vivid, traumatic, memories, described as flashbacks. For a formal diagnosis of PTSD, symptoms need to be ongoing for more than a month.

## DEVELOP A SELF-CARE PLAN

To avoid negative impacts of working in disasters, you can create a personal self-care plan that includes recognising your personal stressors, warning signs, and your favourite and most effective self-care strategies. Practice your self-care plan during your daily work and life. Find out what works best for you in different situations. Practicing these techniques will make them easier to remember and use later.

### **YOUR SELF-CARE PLAN MIGHT INCLUDE:**

Ensure you attend all of the briefings and trainings regarding the event at your workplace. Having more knowledge will make you better prepared.

Assess whether your physical and emotional health is at a level that enables you to be effective at work

Set boundaries for yourself. These might include limiting the shift length of each day worked, or the amount of trauma you are exposed to.

Limit your exposure to the media and/or social media, give yourself a break from the constant stream of news

Make sure you are getting adequate nutrition and rest, including drinking enough water. A decline in physical health will make you a less effective at work

Pay close attention to your emotional responses during your work, check-in with yourself and make time to reflect on how you are going.

Ensure you have healthy methods of releasing emotion. This might be talking to someone, exercising, writing in a journal, or some form of artistic expression.

Avoid using alcohol and drugs, they will only mask the symptoms rather than dealing with the problem.

Regularly make contact with friends and family, and never be afraid to get some extra help from a mental health professional if needed.

You may also like to use a buddy system; team up with another worker and agree to keep an eye on each other's emotional state, and check in with each other regularly.

Regular exercise is also an important part of self-care. Physical activity is an excellent mood regulator and an effective method of stress management. Your normal exercise routine is likely to be disrupted, so it is important to make an effort to include regular exercise in your daily routine.

## **SOME SIGNS YOU NEED TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT OR PROFESSIONAL HELP ARE:**

You are experiencing severe anxiety or depression

You are experiencing extremely intense and distressing thoughts or emotions

You have been having difficult symptoms for an extended period of time

Your symptoms are having a significant impact on your normal level of functioning

You are having thoughts of self-harm or suicide

After responding to a disaster event, you may feel stimulated by the event, and also feel pride and satisfaction regarding the contribution you made. It was probably an intense experience, which can affect you, and possibly your family and friends, for some time after you have returned to your everyday life.

## RETURNING TO NORMAL

### THERE ARE SOME SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU ADJUST BACK TO NORMAL.

**Ensure you get plenty of rest and good nutrition.** You may not have been able to get adequate sleep and rest while responding to a disaster. Allow yourself enough extra time to rest and fully recover. A good diet will also help to streamline the recovery process. Your diet not only affects your physical health, but your thoughts and mood too. Sugar, caffeine and MSG can worsen the symptoms of stress.

**Go slow!** Give yourself enough time to adjust from a highly stimulating, fast-paced environment back to the more relaxed pace of your day-to-day activities. Give yourself permission to feel a bit under-the-weather. These emotions and reactions are a normal response. You may also want to make set aside some time for reflecting on your experiences.

**Be prepared for others' emotional reactions.** Your friends and family may not share the same enthusiasm about your experiences as you. They may have some negative feelings

about you being away, or they may not. It's important to remember that everyone will have different reactions.

**Monitor your emotional state.** You might have some intense, and even overwhelming emotions upon returning home. Keeping track of your emotional state will help you to recognise and manage any periods of intense emotions. Monitoring your emotional state will also help you to recognise if you need extra, professional help. Your daily experiences may trigger intense and difficult memories, and you may react in ways that your friends and family at first don't understand. If appropriate, you might want to try to help others understand what you're feeling.

**If you need more help:** If you have difficulty managing your reactions, or if they become too overwhelming for an extended period of time, a good option is to seek help from a mental health professional.

# MY SELF-CARE PLAN

My stressors are:

To manage stress while at work I will:

To manage stress while at home I will:

## IF I NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE I CAN CALL:

**BEYONDBLUE: 1300 22 4636**

**SANE AUSTRALIA: 1800 18 7263**

**LIFELINE: 13 11 14**

My organisation's wellbeing/support department:

My personal support people:



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