

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES FOR CRISIS RESPONDERS

Caregivers can become emotionally drained from hearing about and being exposed to the pain and trauma of the people they are helping. These are a few tips to keep in mind before, during and after your exposure to trauma. Make sure you take the same advice about self-care that you give others!

Self-care

1. Take an honest look at your life *before* a crisis strikes. Find help to identify your obvious risks and work to correct or minimize them. Resolve your own personal issues and continue to monitor your own reactions to other's pain.
2. Learn as much as possible about the event and deal with and articulate the powerful emotions and reactions related to the event.
3. Be human and allow yourself to grieve when bad things happen to others. Remember that "normal responses to abnormal situations" is true for helpers as well as victims.
4. Develop realistic expectations about the rewards as well as limitations of being a helper. Set boundaries for yourself.
5. Become aware of and alter any irrational beliefs about the helping process. Avoid chaotic situations and learn simplicity. Take time to return to normal activities. Ask yourself "*What can I learn from this experience that will be helpful?*"
6. Cultivate optimism. Having a hopeful mindset lets you see and seize opportunities that are present following any crisis.
7. Persevere. Find ways to provide yourself with emotional and spiritual strength for the future. Reduce isolation from friends, family and helpers. Surround yourself with positive, content and well-adjusted people.
8. Understand that decisions you make can lead to positive results, and influence decisions about the event.
9. Develop and reward a sense of humor. Expose yourself to humorous situations. Learn to laugh, enjoy life; have healthy personal relationships and breathe deeply.

Live a healthy balanced life

1. When engaged in crisis response, encourage other colleagues engaged in the same kind of work to exercise regularly and maintain good nutrition.
2. Identify and engage in activities that provide opportunities for growth and renewal.

Exercise

- Reduces physiological arousal and muscle tension related to stress and encourages the body to move from a state of tension to a state of relaxation.
- Increases efficiency of heart and circulatory system; improved pulmonary function;
- Reduces resting pulse and BP;
- Increases muscular strength and endurance;
- Enhances the immune system;
- Improves mood; decreases anxiety and hostility; improves sleep; helps create better appearance and improved self-esteem

Nutrition

- Calcium to counteract high levels of lactic acid produced by tension;
- Vitamin C to maintain alertness
- Eating regularly 4 to 5 times a day in small amounts
- Eating high-energy non-perishable foods: dried fruit; granola bars; nuts; trail mix; fruit; water; mineral water; milk; decaffeinated coffee/tea; juice; electrolyte supplements.
- Eating good balanced nutritious meals. Avoid caffeine, sugar, pastries, fast foods high in salt and fat.
- Eating with a friend.
- For those able to, taking calcium supplements can counteract high level of lactic acid produced by tension and taking Vitamin C may maintain alertness. *Always check with your doctor to make sure you can tolerate these supplements!*

Ask for and accept help from other professionals

1. Find opportunities to acknowledge express and work through your experience in a supportive environment to protect yourself from further fatigue and emotional exhaustion.
2. Bring in experts who can address compassion fatigue and caregiver stress issues in workshops and seminars.
3. Seek assistance from other colleagues and caregivers who have had experience with trauma and have remained healthy and hopeful or have learned from their experience. Take their advice. Remember that most victims and survivors of trauma do grow and learn from their experiences and so can their helpers.
4. Balance your work with other professional activities that provide opportunities for growth and renewal.

Sources: Carol Hacker, PhD, CTS, Lutheran Disaster Services, Lakewood, CO
Jayne Crisp, CTS, Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists,
International Critical Incident Stress Foundation
Calibre Press