

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
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Tips for Disaster Responders:

UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE

Disaster behavioral health response work can be very satisfying, but it can also take its toll on you. In this tip sheet, you will learn about the causes and signs of compassion fatigue (CF) and tips for how to prevent it from happening to you.

Research indicates that CF is made up of two main components: burnout and secondary traumatic stress.[1] When experiencing burnout, you may feel exhausted and overwhelmed, like nothing you do will help make the situation better. For some responders, the negative effects of this work can make them feel like the trauma of the people they are helping is happening to them or the people they love. This is called secondary traumatic stress. When these feelings go on for a long time, they can develop into "vicarious trauma." This type of trauma is rare but can be so distressing that the way a person views the world changes for the worse.

The Risks of Being a Disaster Behavioral Health Responder

Willingness to be in the trenches when responding to a disaster is one of the things that makes you credible and trustworthy to survivors. This usually means you live in conditions similar to those of disaster survivors. For example, you may have trouble finding enough food, let alone nutritious food. You may struggle with lack of personal space and privacy. You are likely to experience disruptions in sleep due to hectic work schedules or surrounding noise. These things can wear you down behaviorally, cognitively, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. You may also become more vulnerable to feeling the acute traumatic stress, sorrow, and anger of the people you help. You may even experience feelings of guilt for surviving the disaster. When this happens, you may have trouble understanding the risks to your own health and safety.

Signs of Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of your skills and your own personal risks (such as a history of trauma) and other negative aspects of the disaster response experience (e.g., gruesome scenes or intense grieving) so that you recognize how they may be affecting your feelings as well as your behavior. Some responders may experience several of the following signs of burnout and the more serious component of CF, secondary traumatic stress. Remember, not all disaster behavioral health responders will experience every symptom.

[1] Huggard, P., Stamm, B.H. & Pearlman, P.A. (in press). Physician stress: Compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization. In C.R. Figley & P. Huggard (Eds.), *First do no self-harm: Understanding and promoting physician stress resilience*. USA: Oxford University Press.

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When you experience burnout, a symptom of CF, you may have some of the following feelings:

- As if nothing you can do will help
- Tired—even exhausted—and overwhelmed
- Like a failure
- As though you are not doing your job well
- Frustrated
- Cynical
- Disconnected from others, lacking feelings, indifferent
- Depressed
- As if you need to use alcohol or other mind-altering substances to cope

Signs of secondary traumatic stress, a more serious component of CF, may include the following:

- Fear in situations that others would not think were frightening
- Excessive worry that something bad will happen to you, your loved ones, or colleagues
- Easily startled, feeling "jumpy" or "on guard" all of the time
- Wary of every situation, expecting a traumatic outcome
- Physical signs like a racing heart, shortness of breath, and increased tension headaches
- Sense of being haunted by the troubles you see and hear from others and not being able to make them go away
- The feeling that others' trauma is yours

If you are experiencing any of these signs of stress, talk with a friend or colleague, seek wise counsel from a trusted mentor, or ask your supervisor to help you determine a course of action. You may also consider seeking help from a qualified mental health professional.

Tips for Coping With Compassion Fatigue

Traditionally, disaster workers have been trained to screen survivors for negative behavioral health effects. More recently, the field is also focusing on identifying survivor resilience, fostering strengths, and encouraging self-care. Just as you assist survivors in this process, you can apply this approach to yourself on a routine basis—even when not on a disaster assignment—to avoid CF. By focusing on building your strengths and carrying out self-care activities, you are contributing to your behavioral, cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional resilience. The following strategies can help you do just that:

- Focus on the four core components of resilience: adequate sleep, good nutrition, regular physical activity, and active relaxation (e.g., yoga or meditation).
- Get enough sleep or at least rest. This is of great importance, as it affects all other aspects of your work—your physical strength, your decision making, your temperament.
- Drink enough fluids to stay hydrated, and eat the best quality food that you can access.
- Complete basic hygiene tasks like combing your hair, brushing your teeth, and changing clothes when possible. Wearing clean clothes can make you feel better.
- Try to wash up, even just your hands and face, after you leave your work shift. Think of it as a symbolic "washing away" of the hardness of the day.

- Make time to learn about the people with whom you work. Taking time for conversations will help foster feelings of positive regard toward yourself and others.
- Engage with your fellow workers to celebrate successes and mourn sorrows as a group.
- Take time to be alone so you can think, meditate, and rest.
- Practice your spiritual beliefs or reach out to a faith leader for support.
- Take time away from the work when possible. Removing yourself from the disaster area can help you remember that not every place is so troubled.
- Try to find things to look forward to.
- Communicate with friends and family as best you can. If you do not have Internet or cell phone access or ways to mail letters, write to loved ones anyway and send the letters later.
- Create individual ceremonies or rituals. For example, write down something that bothers you and then burn it as a symbolic goodbye. Focus your thoughts on letting go of stress or anger or on honoring the memory, depending on the situation.

Prevention

When combined, the self-care practices mentioned above can help prevent the development of CF. Once you begin to routinely practice these healthy habits, they become part of your overall prevention plan. Not only do healthy habits strengthen your ability to cope while in the moment, they can help your body remember how to bounce back to a healthier state. Remember, prevention is part of a good preparedness plan.

Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction (CS) refers to the sense of fulfillment you feel for the work you do. It can be a source of hope, strength, and ultimately resilience. This satisfaction with your work is also what allows you to face another day, another disaster, another tragedy. It is the quiet knowledge that what you do makes a difference, and that you possess the same strengths you see and support in the survivors with whom you work. Appreciating each encounter with a disaster survivor can add to your CS and help protect you from CF. Even when things do not go as well as you had hoped, you can try to appreciate these encounters, knowing that you took action and extended yourself to others. In these ways, CS can serve as a natural, protective tool against the negative aspects of disaster response work. By noticing, acknowledging, and appreciating the work you do, you can build CS in yourself and encourage it in your colleagues.



When To Get Help

Regular meetings with your supervisor and peer support group during and after a disaster assignment can be a significant help in managing stress and CF. But when signs and symptoms continue for more than 2 weeks or are truly

bothersome at any point, seek out professional help. You can start by contacting your employee assistance program or a primary care physician, who may be able to rule out any physical concerns and recommend a counselor or therapist familiar with traumatic stress. You can also download the SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App and access a directory of behavioral health service providers in your area. Additional information is provided in the **Helpful Resources** section below.



Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac

SAMHSA's *National Recovery Month*
Website: http://www.recoverymonth.gov

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App
Website: http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1

Federal Employee Assistance Program
Toll-Free: 1-800-222-0364
TTY: 1-888-262-7848
Website: http://foh.hhs.gov/services/EAP/EAP.asp

National Institute on Drug Abuse
Website: http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/seeking-drug-abuse-treatment

U.S. Department of Homeland Security: FirstResponder.gov*
Website: http://www.firstresponder.gov

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*
National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
PTSD Information Voicemail: 1-802-296-6300
Website: http://www.ptsd.va.gov

**Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Website: http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator

MentalHealth.gov
Website: http://www.mentalhealth.gov
MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Website: http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746
Website: http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov
This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Workplace Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-WORKPLACE (1-800-967-5752)
Website: http://workplace.samhsa.gov

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