

PREVENTION

Module 12: Self-care for violence prevention helpers

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Why self-care for helpers?

If you are reading this manual, you are likely a concerned, helping professional, volunteer, relative or friend of an older person who lives with violence. You work hard to ensure the safety and well-being of older persons. The work can be demanding and stressful.

You may feel challenged and rewarded by your work in violence prevention or you may feel tired, drained and conflicted. You may feel inspired and energized by this work, or you may feel:

- Despair in knowing that older persons are being harmed;
- Frustrated about the many things that you cannot control;
- Pessimistic, cynical, angry, and hopeless;
- Emotionally numb or disconnected from the work of helping; and,
- A lack of empathy and resentment towards the people you are helping.

We all need to have some degree of stress in our lives to be functional. Stress can help us set goals, complete work and structure our days. It is when "stress" becomes "distress" that problems arise.

Definitions revisited

Stress: the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response.

Burnout: a state of emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by extreme and prolonged *stress*.

Vicarious trauma: the negative changes that happen to helping professionals, volunteers and others over time that result from empathetic dealings with clients and victims and hearing or seeing their traumatic experiences.

Self-care for stress, burnout and vicarious trauma

Helpers often feel stressed and traumatized when working with people who are experiencing violence or the threat of violence. Vicarious trauma happens when a helper "catches" the trauma of those being helped. In this module on self-care, we suggest ways to raise our awareness and reduce the impact of stress, burnout and vicarious trauma on ourselves as helpers.⁴¹

Vicarious trauma can result from exposure to human suffering and cruelty. You may witness the suffering of people you care for or feel responsible to help. Over time, this can change how you feel and think about yourself, your relationships and the world. Both burnout and vicarious trauma can occur when you are witness to violence and stories of unkindness and loss on a regular basis.

In this module, we propose a range of self-care skills that can help you to reduce stress, prevent burnout and increase well-being. Minimizing vicarious trauma requires being aware of our own thoughts and behaviours, reflecting on our beliefs, values and assumptions, and being willing to share our vulnerability with people who support us.

⁴¹ This material has been adapted in part from the Headington Institute. (no date). *Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma*. Retrieved from: <http://www.headington-institute.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2647>.

EMPATHY

Empathy is the ability to identify with another person, to understand and feel another person's pain and joy. Vicarious trauma happens because you care. You empathize with people who are hurting.

Empathy does not mean feeling exactly what someone else is feeling. You are a unique individual. You have your own distinctive personal history, personality and life circumstances. You cannot feel exactly what someone else is feeling, but when you care about another human being, you can relate to the other person's experiences and reactions, to a certain extent. You may care about, and identify with, the pain of people who have endured terrible things. Then you bring their grief, fear, anger and despair into your own awareness and experience and feel it along with them in some way.

Recognizing stress, burnout and vicarious trauma

No two people who work with older victims of violence respond the same way to the stresses and challenges of this work. You may experience changes in the way you think about yourself or see the world. You may also experience emotional, physical or spiritual changes as a result of severe stress or vicarious trauma. These may be serious warning signs that you are over your stress limit and need to take care of yourself. In that case, you may want to see a physician or mental health professional.

- ***Changes in how you see yourself and the world***

- You have trouble seeing the world as a good and safe place.
- You question how the world is supposed to work, and feel discouraged that it is not working as it should.
- You question your effectiveness as a helper (“I wasn’t able to prevent it”).
- You are preoccupied with being a helper, but feel little satisfaction.

- You have “survivor guilt”. You feel guilty about not suffering as much as those you are helping.
 - You are preoccupied with deeply troubling questions such as, “Why is there so much suffering in this world?”, “Why do people do such awful things to each other?”
- ***Changes in your emotional beliefs and needs***
 - You wonder about your own safety and that of your loved ones.
 - You have difficulty trusting others.
 - You are having trouble managing boundaries. For example, you take on too much responsibility. You try to control others. You have difficulty separating your work and personal life.
 - It is getting harder to manage your emotions or make sensible decisions.
 - You cannot help thinking constantly about the victim or the traumatic event.
- ***Changes in self-care and behaviour; psychological and physiological signs and symptoms***
 - You cannot eat or rest, even when help is available.
 - You are not bathing or washing your clothes as often as usual.
 - You are having nightmares.
 - Sleeping does not relieve exhaustion.
 - You have difficulty concentrating.
 - You have lost your sense of humour.
 - You have little appetite and have lost weight recently.
 - You have been eating too much and have gained weight recently.
 - You cannot deal with strong emotions in yourself or others.
 - You have increased sensitivity to violence.
 - You are less interested in activities that once brought you pleasure or relaxation.
 - You have become more irritable, intolerant, moody or impatient.
 - You depend more on cigarettes, medications, alcohol, food, the internet or sex. You are spending more time or money shopping or gambling.

- ***Changes in relationships***

- You feel disconnected from loved ones.
- There is more conflict in your relationships.
- You want and have less social contact than usual.
- You do not want to hear upsetting or disturbing stories from friends or colleagues.
- You are having sexual difficulties or issues with intimacy.

- ***Changes in beliefs about spirituality, meaning, purpose***

- Life has lost meaning, purpose or hope.
- You feel a sense of despair and loss of idealism.
- You no longer feel wonder, gratitude and joy.
- You become troubled by questions such as, “Is there a greater being? Is there a God? If so, how could God allow such terrible things to happen?”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What are some of the ways that caring about victims affects you?*
2. *List some of the ways you feel your work as a helper has had a positive impact on how you see the world, yourself or what matters to you.*
3. *List some of the ways you feel your work as a helper has had a negative impact on how you see the world, yourself or what matters to you.*
4. *Write down any signs of vicarious trauma that you may have experienced this week.*
5. *Think back over the last couple of years. Have you had early warning signs of vicarious trauma (the first signals that warn you that you are struggling in this area)? How might these be impacting you, your family, your colleagues and your work?*

Spiritual self-care to nurture meaning and hope

You will likely be changed in some way by seeing and hearing about terrible things. When your deepest beliefs are challenged by what you see and experience in your work, you change as a person. But remember that you are not a helpless victim in that process. With self-care, you can transform stress, burnout, vicarious trauma and other difficult experiences into valuable lessons for personal growth.

At the deepest level, transforming trauma means finding ways to nurture meaning and hope. What gives life and work meaning? What instills or renews hope? How you answer these questions is important. It gives you a framework to grapple with the tough issues in violence prevention work. This is so even when those issues do not seem to have easy solutions. Find ways to stay connected to sources of meaning and hope in your life, even when you are being deeply challenged.

You likely already have several sources of meaning, purpose, hope and perspective in your life that you can tap into. Connect with these by:

- Reminding yourself of the importance and value of your work to the people you serve and care for.
- Staying in touch with family, friends and colleagues.
- Appreciating the precious “little things” in your life – small moments like sipping a cup of tea, hearing the sound of the wind in the trees or making positive connections with others.
- Gathering with people you care about for traditions, rituals or ceremonies to mark transitions, celebrate joys and mourn losses.
- Taking time to reflect or express gratitude by reading, writing, prayer or meditation.
- Expressing yourself through creative activities, such as journal-writing, drawing, painting or sculpting, dancing, singing, making music, etc.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What are some activities you have used to help relieve stress in your life?*
2. *What are three activities you can start to do now that can help you cope with stress, burnout or vicarious trauma?*

The ABC's of healthy self-care

Healthy self-care can renew our bodies, hearts, minds and spirits. It can help us become more resilient. Self-care is most effective when approached proactively, not reactively. Think of self-care as having three basic aspects: Awareness, Balance and Connection — the ABC's of self-care.

- **Awareness**

Self-care begins in stillness. By quieting our busy lives and finding a space of solitude, we can develop an awareness of our own needs, and then act accordingly.

Schedule a time to do a self-awareness check on a regular basis, for example, after a visit with an older person who has been a victim of violence.

The sooner you notice that something is troubling you (making you tense, uncomfortable, distressed, annoyed or tired, for example) the less likely it is to develop into a much bigger problem. Helpers need to take time to self-reflect. Journal writing, therapy and talking with a supervisor or friend are examples of good habits that build self-awareness.

AWARENESS REFLECTION

- 1. Reflect on how you are feeling (physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually).*
- 2. How have you been feeling lately? How did you feel when you woke up this morning? How do you feel now? Is there anything out of the ordinary? If so, what might that be related to?*

- **Balance**

Self-care is a balancing act. Awareness must be balanced with action. Balance guides our choices about taking on certain activities, behaviours or attitudes. Balance informs how we nurture and align the physical, emotional, spiritual and social aspects of our being. It relates to how much time we spend working, playing and resting. Balance allows us to pay attention to all aspects of who we are.

Effective self-care involves finding and keeping the right balance for yourself as often as you can. This means balancing demanding work with less challenging work. It means balancing work with the rest of your life. One strategy for balanced daily living is to set aside eight hours of the day for work, eight hours for self-development, play or pleasure, and eight hours for rest.

BALANCE REFLECTION

What are three issues that often keep you off-balance in your life or work?

- **Connection**

Healthy self-care involves being connected in meaningful ways with others and to something beyond ourselves. Most humans are interdependent, social beings. We grow and thrive through connections that occur in:

- Friendships;
- Family;
- Social groups;
- Communities;
- Nature;
- Recreational activities;
- Spiritual practices;
- Therapeutic alliances; and,
- A number of other ways.

Having supportive friends, colleagues or peers can help reduce isolation. They provide us with opportunities to share feelings or experiences. It is also an important way to develop and nurture trust, and to increase validation and hope.

Social support – connecting meaningfully with people you like and care about – is good for just about everything related to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health.

Being connected goes beyond our relationships with other people. Connect to whatever nurtures or anchors you. This may be faith, nature, humanity or another source of meaning and purpose. This is especially important for violence prevention workers. A core sense of spiritual connection can prevent and fight the loss of meaning and hope that are at the heart of stress, burnout and vicarious trauma. The key to self-care is to find one's own path to personal and spiritual renewal – to connecting with a sense of awe, joy, wonder and purpose – and revisiting it regularly.

There is no one formula for self-care. Each of our “self-care plans” will be unique and change over time. As we seek renewal in our lives and work,

we must listen well to our own bodies, hearts and minds as well as to our trusted friends, colleagues and families.

CONNECTION REFLECTION

- 1. Do you have any communities that are important to you? Which ones? How do they “feed you” and help you feel supported and connected?*
- 2. What helps you feel connected spiritually? Remember that spirituality is your connection to your deepest meaning and purpose. It can be related to faith, nature, humanity or something else.*

Helpful coping strategies for healthy self-care

- Develop your support system for reaching out and connecting with others.
- Talk about traumatic experiences with empathetic listeners.
- Maintain a balanced diet and regular sleep as much as possible.
- Avoid using stimulants like caffeine, sugar or nicotine.
- Exercise. Take a walk or go to the gym.
- Take a relaxing bath or shower.
- Hug those you love; ask for hugs.
- Spend time outdoors; garden, rake leaves.
- Do relaxation exercises such as yoga, stretching or massage.
- Pray; meditate; listen to guided imagery or inspiring music.
- Express yourself creatively through music, dance or art.
- Cry.
- Perform comforting or inspiring rituals and ceremonies of your culture, such as smudging or sweetgrass, celebrating the Sabbath or observing festival days.
- Work to promote personal and community safety, organize or work for social action.

- Remember that violence should not be *your* burden - help victims build their own support networks with friends, relatives and clergy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Thinking about the ABC's – Awareness, Balance and Connection - what are some healthy personal and work habits that might help you manage vicarious trauma?*
2. *Do you practice Awareness, Balance and Connection? Which practice is strongest in your life? How so? Which one of these presents the biggest challenge to you in terms of taking care of yourself? Explain.*
3. *What is one action you can take each week to take care of yourself? Write a new goal in your agenda each week to remind you.*