

HELPING CAREGIVERS RECOVER: SELF-CARE TIPS

Everyone faces adversity sometime in their life, and we learn and grow from these experiences. A disaster can be an overwhelming event at any age, but we all have inner resources—our own resiliency—and outer resources we can call on to see us through. Life-altering events are opportunities to reflect on where we have been and where we are going, and the things that bring meaning to our lives. Take some time to think not only about the losses and changes brought by the disaster, but also the gains from the experience. Perhaps you have learned not to “sweat the small stuff” or to be more flexible. Perhaps you have gained new friendships or become closer with neighbors or co-workers. Take time to reflect, understand and come to terms with this important event in your life, and then you will be better able to help children and others to do the same.

Taking care of yourself may require some creativity and adaptation. Some of the activities you used to do or places you used to go may no longer be accessible. Think about the things that have helped in the past, and where you can, try to put those in place today. Think of new things that might help you feel better day to day. Often it is the pile up of small stresses that make us feel overwhelmed; similarly it can be the small ways you learn to relax and stay healthy that will keep you resilient during this difficult time.

You will feel the effects of stress in your body. When under stress it is common to feel headaches, muscle tension, stomach upset and fatigue. To take care of yourself, remember ...

- Eat regular and healthy meals
- Give yourself adequate time to rest and recover when you're sick
- Get enough rest
- Exercise
- Do things that you enjoy, take time for fun and relaxation
- Take breaks from the work and stress to release and recharge

Taking Care of Your Mind

You may find you have many things on your mind and long to-do lists. Your mind also needs care and rest. Even for just 15 minutes a day, give yourself space for quiet reflection and a time away from people, phones and demands so you can refresh.

- Find activities that help you relax, such as breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, walking, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to music or spending time in nature.
- Try to keep perspective: Recovery is a long process, but every day there are changes and improvements. Try to see the positives each day.
- Consider the extraordinary changes and challenges you have experienced and be patient with yourself.
- Focus on the small things you can do to improve the day to day, rather than putting your time and energy into things that are out of your control.
- Explore your creativity to make meaning of what has happened. Express your thoughts and feelings in new ways, such as journaling, painting, drawing, sculpting or music.

- Give yourself time for self-reflection and understanding. Practice spiritual self-care in the way that works best for you.

Keep in Touch with Friends and Family

Try not to isolate yourself and dwell on your feelings alone. More than ever, surround yourself with the important and caring people in your life.

- Identify the people, activities, places and things that are a comfort to you, and seek them out on a regular basis.
- Stay in touch with the important people in your life and accept their support and kindness.
- Talk with others who face similar challenges to know you are not alone and that others understand. Share the lessons you've learned for coping with the new challenges in your lives.
- Talk with your clergy, counselors or others who can provide comfort and help.

Reaching out to and helping others can help to counter your own feelings of helplessness. Small things—an encouraging word, running an errand or watching a child for someone, or being there to listen—are ways you can make a difference. Remember to be aware of your limitations too, and know when you need to focus more on caring for yourself.

Outlets for Emotions

Overwhelming emotions are common following major events, big changes and ongoing stress. Take time to deal with and to express your own feelings.

- **Crying:** It's all right to cry and to laugh. You may find yourself crying in front of your children. Explain that you feel sad sometimes too, that it's okay to cry, and what you do to feel better. This can be an opportunity to help children to understand and manage their own sad feelings.
- **Anger:** Many people feel very angry after a disaster—the situation feels unfair and unjust and recovery and rebuilding can be fraught with problems. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, be careful of intense anger and aggression that can hurt others and cause problems at home or on the job. Find healthy and safe ways to express frustration and anger, such as taking a walk or doing some physical activity.
- **Shame and Blame:** After a disaster, many people think about the things they wished they had done, or done differently. In a time of crisis, you make the best decision you can with the information you have at the moment. There was no way to know how things might turn out. Forgive yourself, let go and move forward.
- **Survivor Guilt:** Many people who survive disasters feel guilty that they, their families and homes survived when others lost so much. Feelings of guilt are actually a reflection of your compassion and human ability to feel others' pain.

Getting Back to Work

The return to work can be both a relief and a challenge. Work helps give a regular structure to life, and something meaningful and productive to look forward to. It can also be difficult to get back to work when your life may still be disrupted, and you may lack energy, focus and concentration. Try these things to make the return to work easier:

- Seek support from professional groups, such as mentoring groups, associations, CCR&R staff, or licensing entities.
- Create a welcoming work environment with things that remind you of the beauty in your life. Try placing photos, fresh flowers or meaningful objects on your desk.

- Have reasonable expectations for what you are able to do right now. Stay in touch with supervisors so they are aware of any challenges you are facing.
- Don't overwork—keep regular hours.
- At times when you find it hard to concentrate, try doing menial or repetitive tasks.
- Be patient and supportive with co-workers who are also under stress. Be there for each other.

Be Aware of “Pitfalls”

With stress and trauma often comes a great deal of pain. Dealing with the pain is an important part of self-care and recovery. However, some avenues of coping with pain can cause greater problems. Be careful of pitfalls and dangerous ways of dealing with stress:

- Unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others
- Working too much
- Dangerous behaviors like risky sex or driving too fast
- Drinking or self-medicating with drugs to numb the pain. Remember that alcohol can lower your mood, cause mood swings and interrupt your sleep cycle. Alcohol and drugs can strain relationships.

When to Seek Help

Continue to remind yourself that these normal reactions are to be expected during times like these. If you find that symptoms are greatly impacting your ability to function at home or at work, and if they get worse or persist for more than three months, consider talking things over with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist, social worker, or counselor. In particular, if you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, a mental health professional can talk to you about ways to relieve the overwhelming stress.

- Feeling constantly on edge or in danger
- Rage, extreme irritability, or intense agitation
- Severe anxiety, worry or feelings of panic
- Severe depression marked by the inability to feel hope or pleasure; a lack of energy and motivation; feelings of worthlessness
- Abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, and/or illegal drugs
- Repeated and intrusive memories or “flashbacks” of disaster-related events
- Emotional numbing—feeling “empty”
- Feeling extremely helpless

If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, it is important that you seek help for your safety and the safety of others.

Even if you don't find yourself experiencing the types of things listed above, seeking the guidance of a mental health professional might be the right thing for you to do. These are extraordinary times that call for using all of our resources for strength and recovery. Give yourself permission to access those resources, to take care of yourself.

Counselors, social workers and psychologists can work together with you to identify strategies and plans for staying strong and continuing to support your friends and family through this time.

SAMHSA Help Line:

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

Let's Take a Breather ...

Relaxation tools help you to center and calm yourself, even on stressful days, in order to keep your mind focused and your body functioning well. Breath is the key to relaxation. Shallow breathing can leave a person feeling cold or sweaty, lightheaded and with a fast heartbeat. As you learn to breathe slowly and deeply, your muscles automatically relax each time you exhale and your mind will become clear.

When you first start to practice relaxation, you may become more aware of negative or painful sensations. However, continuing to practice relaxation in a way that is challenging and tolerable can help you feel better. Remember, you don't have to change how you're feeling or change your environment—and you probably can't.

The key to relaxation is just to be quiet and present with whatever you're feeling and thinking in the moment. Try these basic techniques during your daily schedule:

- Identify a word, sound or phrase that you can repeat to yourself while sitting quietly with your eyes closed.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing, giving attention to inhaling and releasing each breath.
- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and visualize yourself in a soothing place such as a garden or beach. Use all of your senses to place yourself in the scene.
- Try Progressive Muscle Relaxation: systematically tense and relax different body muscles from toes to head. Feel the difference between tension and real relaxation in your body.
- Slow down your breathing and count ten breaths, from ten to one, feeling more relaxed each time you exhale.
- Stand up and stretch. Rotate your shoulders and your head.
- Take a moment to walk around the room or down the hall.