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Self-Care for Caregivers

*Responding to the Stress of
Terrorism and Armed Conflicts*

Canada

Self-Care for Caregivers

Terrorist attacks, acts of war, and sudden violent events such as disasters engage caregivers (doctors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, psychiatrists, teachers, counsellors, and other health workers) in working long hours, helping people of all ages to understand and manage the many reactions, feelings and challenges triggered by these stressful circumstances.

The massive effort put forth by caregivers in response to the psycho-social effects of these events is a critical contribution to their community's recovery. Caregivers draw on strength and pride that comes from a sense of helping members of their community.

However, caregivers sometimes need to be reminded that a sustained response such as this can also lead to physical and emotional wear and tear. Without conscious attention to self-care, caregivers' effectiveness and ultimately their health will suffer.

Common Sources of Stress for Caregivers

Here are common sources of stress that caregivers may be faced with:

- Trying to live up to high expectations from clients and/or from self
- Intensive caring for others at the expense of self-care
- Inability to set appropriate boundaries
- Pushing oneself too hard
- Mental and physical demands
- Heavy workloads
- Long hours on the job
- Time pressures
- Limited resources
- Competing priorities
- Media requests
- Political and organizational pressures

Signs of Stress to be on the Alert For

Caregivers are usually alert to the stresses of people they help. They are not, however, always as alert to the stress and fatigue that can slowly and insidiously surface in their own lives. Caregivers, like everyone else, have also been affected by these events and need to be reminded of normal stresses that may affect them.

Common Physical/Behavioural Reactions: fatigue, loss of appetite, difficulty falling asleep, restlessness, headaches, changes in sleeping, increased blood pressure, changes in eating habits, increased susceptibility to colds, flu, infection, change in libido, changes in smoking habits, changes in alcohol and drug consumption

Common Emotional Reactions: feeling helpless, overwhelmed, inadequate, fragile, vulnerable, unable to cope or go on, increased mood swings, increased emotional lability, decreased motivation, feeling burned out, crying more frequently and easily, isolation, changes in communication patterns and other relationship dynamics, withdrawal

Common Cognitive Reactions: confusion, difficulty making decisions, difficulty problem solving, memory blanks, having ambiguous feelings, questioning why this happened in a world that is supposed to be safe, difficulty concentrating or paying attention

Caregivers are not immune to the above reactions and need to remind themselves that these are normal human responses to stressful circumstances. Although many of the underlying stresses cannot be prevented, you can increase your resistance by taking care of yourself and staying healthy. It is important to pace yourself and know your limits so you can continue to be available to your clients and your community.

Here are some stress-relieving activities that you can act on immediately:

- **Go for a 15-minute walk** during a lunch or coffee break. Take other opportunities to be physically active. (For ideas, see Canada's Physical Activity Guide, www.paguide.com or call 1-888-334-9769.)
- Eat sensibly. Avoid excessive use of caffeine and alcohol. Drink plenty of water and juices. (For ideas, see Canada's Food Guide, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nutrition>)
- **Know and respect your limits.** If you feel exhausted and need time off, take it. Respect commitment for regularly scheduled time off.
- **Spend time with family and friends.** Talk to them. Listen to their stories. Listen to them if they become concerned with your health and well-being.
- As much as possible, continue to **participate in previous social and recreational activities.**
- **Get some rest.** If you have trouble sleeping, get up and do something relaxing or enjoyable.
- **Be on the lookout for any changes** in your habits, attitudes and moods.
- **Share your own and clients' reactions** and issues with colleagues. Don't hesitate to ask others for advice.
- **Include yourself on the list of people you are taking care of.** Take some time to do something just for yourself every day. Taking care of yourself will put you in better shape to give care to others.
- **Be self-nurturing** and don't forget to laugh.

Delayed Stress Reactions

Past experiences have shown that after tragic events, it may take several weeks to adjust to "regular" routines. This is normal. The information above will help you.

Family Needs

One of the most difficult challenges for caregivers is to maintain some kind of balance between the demands of the emergency work and the needs of their own families. Keep the lines of communication open. You and your partner may find it helpful to read the other pamphlets in this series:

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Helping Your Child Cope

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Helping Your Teens Cope

Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts: Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities

Community Resources to Call on for Help

The recent events and the stressful climate that resulted can make personal stressful events even more difficult to deal with. If you have experienced a death in the family, divorce, a move to a new town, or other stressors, you may feel more vulnerable. If, after you have tried these suggestions, you find you still feel overwhelmed and you think you can't cope, it may be time to speak to a colleague or a health professional.

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Également disponible en français sous le titre :
Le stress provoqué par le terrorisme et les conflits armés : comment prendre soin de soi comme intervenant.

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