



# Responding to Stressful Events



**Self-Care  
for Caregivers**

## Responding to Stressful Events: Self-Care for Caregivers

Natural or human-caused disasters such as earthquakes, health emergencies, terrorist attacks or acts of war can engage caregivers (physicians, 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 catastrophic events is a critical contribution to their community's recovery. However, caregivers sometimes need to be reminded that a sustained response 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 their clients' high expectations and/or their own
- Intensive caring for others at the expense of self-care
- Inability to set appropriate boundaries
- Pushing themselves 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

## Be on the Alert for Signs of Stress

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 surface in their own lives, 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, 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:

- **Go for a 15-minute walk** during a lunch or coffee break. Take other opportunities to be physically active.

- **Eat sensibly.** Avoid excessive use of caffeine and alcohol. Drink plenty of water and juices.
- **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. Following the tips on self-care given above will help you deal with delayed reactions.

### 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 Stressful Events: Helping Children Cope**
- **Responding to Stressful Events: Helping Teens Cope**
- **Responding to Stressful Events: Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities**

### **When to Seek Help**

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The information offered in this brochure is a reference point to help you to understand some of the stress reactions you or other family members or friends may experience. If, at any time, you feel overwhelmed and unable to cope it is important to seek out additional assistance. Here are some circumstances which indicate that it is time to get help by speaking to a health professional such as a psychologist, family doctor, psychiatrist, social worker or nurse:

- Can't return to a normal routine
- Feeling extremely helpless
- Having thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- Using alcohol and drugs excessively

### **Resources which may be available in your community to call for help:**

- Distress or crisis centres
- Hospital in your community
- Family service agency
- Bereavement group
- Leader of your faith community
- Include family and friends you can call to talk things over.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## **Mental Health Support Network of Canada, Members:**

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