



Taking Care of You

By the very nature of Ombudsman program work, you may be subjected to compassion fatigue, burnout, or individual trauma. We have provided brief information about these and encourage you to use resources provided by Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMHSA](#)) or other reputable health organizations. Do not hesitate to seek assistance from family, friends, faith communities, co-workers, employers, and mental health providers if you are struggling.

Compassion Fatigue is emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Compassion Fatigue can occur due to one stressful experience or can be due to a “cumulative” level of trauma.

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion that occurs when we feel overwhelmed by too many demands, too few resources, and too little recovery time. Burnout occurs over time, rather than in response to one event. Signs of burnout may be physical or emotional exhaustion, fatigue, insomnia, forgetfulness, impaired concentration, increased illness, loss of appetite, anxiety, depression, or anger.

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s function and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (per SAMHSA HRSA Center for Integrated Health Services)

Trauma-informed care is an organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma (review this [fact sheet](#) for additional information). Recognition of the role of trauma in our lives is very important.

Stress and Self-Care

The following information describes emotions you may experience, provides reminders for self-care, and guidance for seeking assistance. We encourage self-awareness and self-screening for indicators.



Typical Reactions to Stress May Include

- Anxiety, worry, or fear
- Concern about being able to care for others
- Uncertainty or frustration
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Boredom and frustration
- Uncertainty or ambivalence
- Sadness
- Feelings of grief and loss
- Desire to use alcohol or drugs to cope
- Symptoms of depression
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Tips for Self-Care

- Understand that emotions such as frustration, loneliness, sadness, anger, boredom, and/or ambivalence during this crisis are normal. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel. You are not alone. Seek assistance from a mental health professional for mental health and/or behavioral health support.
- Stay connected with family, friends, and coworkers with frequent texts, calls, or video chats.
- Exercise and get outside for fresh air.
- Eat healthy, stay hydrated, and get 7-8 hours of sleep.
- Less is more. In times of increased stress, you may find it more difficult to stay focused, make decisions, and process information during this situation. When possible, simplify minor decisions (e.g., plan meals, set alarms for reminders for breaks), establish daily routines, identify priorities and only do what absolutely needs to be addressed.
- Identify what is important to you. Set aside time each day to do at least one activity you enjoy outside of work (e.g., read, write, watch a movie, listen to music, etc.).
- Stay informed but limit the amount of news you read or listen to daily.
- Remember to breathe and laugh. In times of high stress, take a few deep breaths before responding. Start practicing mindfulness exercises. Do something every day that makes you laugh and brings you joy.
- If you have concerns regarding household finances due to family members that are recently unemployed, speak with your employer or contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) regarding leave, benefits, and possible local, state, and federal supports. Locate local and regional U.S. Department of Labor programs using this [map](#).
- Protect your personal time and do your best to work during designated hours daily.
- Take some time off – even if it is just half a day or a full-day as often as possible.

Create a Self-Care Plan

The [USC School of Social Work](#) recommends the practice of self-awareness and developing a self-care plan.

- Recognize your stressors and how you respond to them (e.g., trouble sleeping, increased irritability).
- Categorize and set-time specific goals for self-care activities (e.g., identify your preferred type of exercise, how often you will exercise, how long you will exercise, and where you will exercise).
- Develop a detailed self-care plan using specific goals for the domains of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual well-being.
- Create accountability for your self-care plan (e.g., meet virtually with co-workers or friends and talk about self-care).



The [Self-Care Wheel](#) is another exercise to assist with self-awareness in identifying your needs in these areas: psychological, emotional, spiritual, personal, professional, and physical. The Self-Care Wheel was adapted from the [Self-Care Assessment](#) Worksheet and both can be used to understand what you need in the short and long-term to ensure self-care and maintain balance.¹

In addition to the above resources, the Professional Quality of Life ([ProQOL](#)) is a free tool for anyone in a helper profession to assess their current levels of compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue. There are free measures, manuals, self-care tools, training slides, and more.

¹ Adapted from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Saakvitne, Pearlman, and Staff of TSI/CAAP. Created by the Olga Phoenix Project: Healing for Social Change (2013). <https://risecenter.ucla.edu/file/f16827bb-a951-4146-83e9-2025ffde6070>

Program Management Considerations

We encourage state Ombudsmen and other program leaders (i.e., representatives that manage local Ombudsman entities) to maintain regular communication with all representatives, both staff and volunteer especially during challenging times. Some ideas to stay in contact include:

- Use of video chat technology for individual or team meetings. “Seeing” each other rather than just talking may be reassuring to some. Provide instructions each meeting to explain how to work the video, audio, chat, and Q&A features.
- Share self-care resources and encourage representatives to participate in self-care activities. Ask them to take a self-care assessment and/or to create a self-care plan as mentioned above.
- Hold brief morning “coffee chats” for regular communications.
- Set a regular time once a week for “open office hours” and let representatives know when and how they can reach you with questions and/or for support.
- Text or email individuals or an established group with positive messages and encouragement.
- Send hand-written notes in the mail.
- Check-in with staff and volunteers often. Ask how they are feeling and coping, if they need help, and remind them of available supports.

If Ombudsman program staff and/or volunteers show signs of stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and/or trauma offer to speak with them privately.

- Ask how they feel. Listen attentively and be sensitive to their feelings.
- Share resources for self-care and assessments such as those provided in this document or other resources that your employer may provide.
- Set aside time to check-in with them on a regular basis.
- Ascertain whether the representative needs time away from their work or volunteer activities with the program.
- Encourage them to seek professional help.
- Keep in regular contact with them and develop a joint plan for their return to work or volunteer activities.

Resources

NORC Resources

- Trauma-Informed Care: Nursing Home Requirements and Ombudsman Program Advocacy:
<https://ltombudsman.org/uploads/files/support/tic-factsheet.pdf>

National Institutes of Health Emotional Wellness Toolkit

- This toolkit includes six strategies for improving your mental health:
<https://www.nih.gov/health-information/emotional-wellness-toolkit>



988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call: Dial 988

Text: Text 988 to 988

Chat: Use the chat service online

Website: <https://988lifeline.org/>



U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters.

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990

SMS: Text TalkWithUs to 66746 SMS (Español): "Hablanos" al 66746 TTY: 1-800-846-8517

Website (English): <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

SAMHSA's National Helpline Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>



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This project was supported, in part, by grant number 90OMRC0001-01-00, from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration for Community Living policy.