

Take Care

A guide to taking care of yourself after the Sonoma County fire as a helping professional

***You were just exposed to a natural disaster that kept going for more than one week, that is a big deal. This resource is a collection of organized information designed to help those who work in helping professions understand how to care for themselves while they are caring for others.**

TRAUMA

According to the American Psychological Association, the following are common symptoms of trauma:

- *Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. Irritability, mood swings, anxiety, and depression are coming manifestations of this.
- *Flashbacks: repeated and vivid memories of the event that lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating.
- *Confusion or difficulty making decisions
- *Sleep or eating issues
- *Fear that the emotional event will be repeated
- *A change in interpersonal relationships skills, such as an increase in conflict or a more withdrawn and avoidant personality
- *Physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and chest pain

TRIGGERS

A **trigger** is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma. Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback.

From the School Box Project

SIRENS AND LOUD NOISES AS TRIGGERS:

Sirens are going to be around for a bit longer here in Sonoma County and they are triggering for all of us, particularly for the children.

- 1.) Allow space for anxiety and fear to become words. Give opportunities for people to explain how they feel when they hear a siren.
- 2.) Repeat a gentle mantra each time to provide reframing. "Oh, listen to that- sounds like our heroes and protectors are hard at work again. Something or someone is getting just the help they need."
- 3.) Give an opportunity for action: how this looks will vary based on age. One example would be to track the number of times you hear sirens throughout the day (give different children the job of making the tally on the chalk board) and at the end of school day, create a thank you letter project that begins with "Dear Firefighters, today we heard you helping people 11 times. Thank you for keeping us safe."
- 4.) Take care of YOU. Self-regulation is priority number one so you can bring your best self to the children and others.

There is no safe space where triggers cannot enter. Make room for them.

Looking at the damage done

If you feel anxious or nervous about seeing the actual fire damage and you can stay away from it, please do. Only expose yourself to pictures or actual visits to sights that were burnt down when you feel like you are in a more stable and grounded space.

Social Media and your screen

The world of social media is over stimulating. We are constantly maxing out our brains capacity to take in information when we use our phones and computers all day.

- Take a break and set boundaries for yourself around screen use
- Have a time when you turn off your phone and stop checking your emails
- Take shifts with others around who has their phones on, if you need it

VICARIOUS TRAUMA/COMPASSION FATIGUE

A lot of us have been swimming in this crisis on a moment-by-moment basis. Our fight, flight or freeze response gets triggered and we keep going because there is so much work that needs to be done. After using as much energy/adrenaline to function it is normal to crash. What goes up must come down. Check in with yourself!

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/vicarious-trauma-value-of-self-care-for-therapists-0627164>

Helping professionals often experience vicarious trauma through the stories told by the people they work with. This secondary trauma also referred to as compassion fatigue, can seriously hinder their work if they remain unaware of its negative impact and/or do not practice sufficient self-care strategies.

Becoming aware of the signs of compassion fatigue is the first step in addressing the issue. The following are some red flags:

1. Preoccupation with the traumatic stories of the people they work with
2. Emotional symptoms of anger, grief, mood swings, anxiety, or depression
3. Physical issues related to stress, such as headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, or problems sleeping
4. Feeling burned out, powerless, hopeless, disillusioned, irritable, and/or angry toward “the system”
5. A tendency to self-isolate, be tardy, avoid certain people, or experience a lack of empathy and loss of motivation

Anyone working with trauma survivors is susceptible to vicarious trauma. Helping professionals who have been subjected to trauma themselves also may be more at risk for developing compassion fatigue, especially if they have not worked through their issues.

SELF CARE: A MUST!

Developing an adequate self-care strategy is key to preventing or overcoming vicarious trauma. Some of the techniques that can be used include:

Maintain a good work-life balance. This involves taking time off to recharge and avoiding working long hours and/or carrying too heavy of a caseload or workload.

Exercise to relieve stress. Developing a good workout routine is important to help increase feel-good endorphins and improve one’s outlook on life. Taking a yoga class, doing aerobic activity, or even just going for a walk can be invigorating and help change one’s perspective.

Start a meditation practice. Initially, try sitting quietly for just 10 minutes a day, then gradually increase the time to 20 minutes. Meditation has many benefits and can assist one with feeling more peaceful and grounded.

Develop a good social network. Having a good support system in place is important in order to be able to connect with others in a meaningful way.

Use humor to unwind. Humor is good medicine when it comes to relieving stress and improving one’s mood. Watch a comedy, play with a pet, read a funny book—whatever moves you and helps you relax.

Reconnect with Mother Nature. Being out in nature is therapeutic, whether you go for a hike in the woods, a walk on the beach, or just do a little gardening.

Get involved with activities outside of work. Take your mind off of work by taking a class or engaging in a creative endeavor such as drawing, painting, or writing.

Meet with a therapist to discuss concerns. Even individuals in the helping professions can benefit from meeting with a counselor, especially when they are experiencing compassion fatigue. A compassionate therapist can help put things in perspective and help identify additional coping skills.

FOUR STAGES OF DISASTER RELIEF

The American Red Cross recognizes that our disaster relief unfolds in the following stages:

1. Heroic Phase.
2. Honeymoon Phase.
3. Disillusionment Phase.
4. Reconstruction Phase.

What happens in each phase? What should we anticipate as each unfolds? How do public expectations change? How should our communications strategy shift in each phase?

1. Heroic Phase.

This occurs immediately after a disaster strikes. The community is often shell-shocked and in dire need of basic emergency needs such as food and shelter.

The Red Cross is already in place and providing services immediately after the disaster. Therefore, we are seen as being heroes in the community, just as fire and emergency personnel are perceived as being heroes. In public affairs, we have a twofold message in the heroic phase. First, we want to assure the public that we are there. We want people to know that the Red Cross is on the scene providing immediate relief. Second, we want to inform those affected by the disaster how they can GET help.

2. Honeymoon Phase.

This stage occurs in the first few days after the disaster. Usually it carries with it a great deal of public support and media coverage. This is also the time when we receive the most praise from public officials. Fundraising and volunteer recruitment are easiest in the honeymoon phase.

In addition to helping people know how to GET help, in this phase the messages expand to help people know how to GIVE help (and also how NOT to help). Individuals want to volunteer, and people are looking for ways to contribute money or donate in-kind items such as clothes, food or water.

While it is useful to capitalize on the goodwill of the public during this phase, we must also be careful not to get carried away. Our public affairs work must help manage public expectations about the kinds and amounts of services that we provide.

3. Disillusionment Phase.

By this time, the community and survivors are getting tired. They are being worn thin by the stress of the ongoing recovery efforts.

People sometimes begin to question Red Cross and its service delivery, fundraising methods or community partnerships. During this phase, media, elected officials, partners or the general public are more apt to vocalize criticism.

It is very important for us to closely monitor the mood of the community and to stay abreast of changes in the operation. We must be fully prepared to explain any changes in service delivery.

Disillusionment will likely be expressed first in the social media. This is the phase when we must listen to what people are blogging or tweeting. We must join their conversations by commenting on blogs, using Facebook to address concerns and tweeting to correct misinformation and disseminate accurate information.

4. Reconstruction Phase.

This is the long-term phase of the disaster where we must manage the expectations of the public regarding the ongoing recovery process. By now, the news media will likely have shifted their focus somewhere else. Likewise, the public's attention moves from Red Cross services to the work of our partners. At this stage, it is important to help people understand the difference between our services and those of our partners.

In the timeline following a disaster, the relief effort transitions through these four distinct, yet overlapping phases. Our communications changes in each phase, yet we remain anchored to our fundamental Red Cross message—We Are There!