

## Special Topic: Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

### Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

The “cost of caring” (Figley, 1982, 1983) for others can be high. Responding to disasters can strain your abilities to cope. Understandably, the disaster survivors you serve have been subjected to the devastating scenes and effects of the traumatic event. In your response work, you will be indirectly exposed to the disaster through your work with survivors. This may lead to “secondary traumatization,” where responders feel the distress of survivors. Secondary traumatization may lead to two potentially negative reactions: burnout and compassion fatigue.

**Burnout** is a general disinterest and lack of engagement in your work that comes from a combination of overwork and overstress. **Compassion fatigue** is a related concept that focuses on a responder’s diminished ability to provide emotional support for disaster survivors. This lack of empathy and concern comes from overexposure to the suffering of survivors compounded by the emotionally-draining effects of prolonged disaster duty. It is important for you and your teammates to recognize the signs of burn out and compassion fatigue and take steps to prevent these outcomes.

Compassion fatigue symptoms are apparent across many domains of human function. These include experiencing physiological signs of stress and physical exhaustion. Emotional signs include anxiety, guilt, anger and helplessness. Cognitive symptoms include difficulty concentrating, apathy, and preoccupation with trauma. Behaviorally, there is a decrease in job performance and a marked reduction in the time spent engaging with survivors. This may be accompanied by low morale, low motivation, and reduced readiness or willingness to respond effectively in the future when called upon in times of crisis.

When you as a responder feel stressed, your quality of life and personal relationships can be affected. It is important that you learn to recognize and identify your own stress triggers, as well as your team members’ stress triggers. Recognizing and identifying these triggers can help prevent burnout and compassion fatigue, and build resilience. Fortunately, practicing the strategies, objectives, and tactics of **SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION for Disaster Responders** acts to prevent both burnout and compassion fatigue.

To become resilient as an individual, as well as a disaster responder, practicing a balanced lifestyle is of the utmost importance. Applying adaptive stress management strategies can be very helpful. Building a comforting support system within your work unit can help prevent stress from turning into burnout or compassion fatigue. When you can receive support from team members, you will be better equipped to respond effectively to the needs of survivors. Ask yourself, what do persons within your support system (team members, co-workers, managers) say to you or do for you already that you find comforting? Try identifying some things that you would like to have people in your support system say or do that you would find comforting. Share these with your team members and ask them how you can offer support for each of them.

Disaster responders are not immune to the effects of stress. Rather, the high demands on work performance before, during, and after disasters, as well as the effects of bearing witness to the severe distress of survivors can be taxing. Stress reduction and prevention of burnout and compassion fatigue, depend on learning to identify stress signs, using effective stress management techniques, and fostering comforting work environments.

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**Additional Resources Regarding Compassion Fatigue and Burnout**

National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet: *Working with Trauma Survivors: What workers need to know.*  
[http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/FederalResource/Response/21-Working\\_with\\_Trauma\\_Survivors.pdf](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/FederalResource/Response/21-Working_with_Trauma_Survivors.pdf)

Helpguide.org (A Trusted Non-Profit Resource): *Preventing Burnout*  
[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout\\_signs\\_symptoms.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm)

SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center: *Mental Health Response to Mass Violence and Terrorism Chapter V: Stress Prevention, Management, and Intervention*  
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/sma-3959/chapter5.asp>