

# Self-care

## Factsheet

Self-care can be defined as the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker.<sup>1</sup>

### Difficult situations in the context of domestic violence

Frontline responders play an important role in providing emotional support to victims, improving their safety, and providing legal assistance, but they routinely encounter unpredictable and complex situations and confront a range of challenges while providing support to victims.<sup>2</sup>

- **Difficulty in disengaging from work**
- **Frustration and disappointment**
- **Fatigue and emotional exhaustion**
- **Difficulties in emotional regulation**
- **Concern and anxiety**

### Excursus: Dealing with frustrations

Victims of domestic violence very often stay in abusive relationships, seemingly not allowing intervention for various reasons, including a lack of support. This can be exhausting, frustrating, and difficult to understand. Though professionals may feel frustration, they may be their first and only point of contact.<sup>3</sup>

- Realise early on that the victim may never leave the abuser.
- Recognise that leaving is a process, not an event – the timeline from the beginning of abuse to the point of leaving may take decades.
- Get to know as much as you can about how domestic violence is being addressed at a local level. At the bare minimum, you should know the domestic violence support services in your area, so that you can provide accurate information for victims.
- Do not feel that you have to know everything that there is to know about domestic violence. Listening and communicating support and active contact details for an external support agency is better than not talking about it at all.
- Be aware of your own safety needs. Should a violent incident occur, arrange a staff debriefing session. Violence affects everybody differently.
- Have local contact details for domestic violence support available to all staff members.
- Look after yourself. Working with the effects of domestic violence professionally can bring personal issues to the surface, particularly if you are experiencing or have experienced abuse yourself.



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Find more information about the **importance of self-care** in [Module 9](#).

## Stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma

Domestic violence is not only a problem for those directly affected but can also pose significant challenges for professionals. Problems, frustrations, and barriers can result in stress, or even burnout, and in some cases in vicarious trauma if not effectively managed. It is important for professionals to be aware of the risks and recognise the signs.

### Stress

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.<sup>4,5</sup>

Stress can be “acute” or “chronic”<sup>6</sup>:

- **Acute stress happens within a few minutes to a few hours** of an event. It lasts for a short period of time, usually less than a few weeks, and is very intense. It can happen after an upsetting or unexpected event. For example, this could be a sudden bereavement, assault, or natural disaster.
- **Chronic stress lasts for a long period of time or keeps coming back.** You might experience this if you are under lots of pressure a lot of the time. You might also feel chronic stress if your day-to-day life is difficult, for example if you are a carer or if you live in poverty or if you are a victim of experience domestic violence.

### Signs and symptoms of stress

When a person has long-term (chronic) stress, continued activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on the body. Physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms develop. Our body’s autonomic nervous system plays an important role in some of those symptoms as it controls our heart rate, breathing, vision changes and more.

Physical symptoms of stress include<sup>7</sup>:

- Difficulty breathing
- Panic attacks
- Blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches and headaches
- Chest pains and high blood pressure
- Indigestion or heartburn
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Feeling sick, dizzy or fainting
- Sudden weight gain or weight loss
- Developing rashes or itchy skin
- Sweating
- Changes to your period or menstrual cycle
- Existing physical health problems getting worse



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Click [here](#) for an explanation video on **how stress affects our body**.



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Learn more about **how stress affects the brain** in particular [in this video](#).



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[This video](#)

explains **what happens to our body and brain when we skip sleep.**



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Click [here](#) to explore the stages of how our memory stores information and how short-term stress impacts this process.

If we experience high levels of stress, these symptoms can get worse. This can also happen if we experience stress for a long period of time.

Stress can lead to emotional and mental symptoms.<sup>8</sup> If you are stressed, you might feel:

- Irritable, angry, impatient or wound up
- Over-burdened or overwhelmed
- Anxious, nervous or afraid
- Like your thoughts are racing and you cannot switch off
- Unable to enjoy yourself
- Depressed
- Uninterested in life
- Like you have lost your sense of humour
- A sense of dread
- Worried or tense
- Neglected or lonely
- Existing mental health problems getting worse

Some people who go through severe stress may experience suicidal feelings. This can be very distressing.

Often, people with chronic stress try to manage it with unhealthy behaviours.<sup>9</sup> If you feel stressed, it might make you:

- Find it hard to make decisions
- Unable to concentrate
- Unable to remember things, or make your memory feel slower than usual
- Constantly worry or have feelings of dread
- Snap at people
- Bite your nails
- Pick at or itch your skin
- Grind your teeth or clench your jaw
- Experience sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- Eat too much or too little
- Smoke, use recreational drugs or drink alcohol more than you usually would
- Restless, like you cannot sit still
- Cry or feel tearful
- Spend or shop too much
- Not exercise as much as you usually would, or exercise too much
- Withdraw from people around you

### **Causes of stress**

Many things can cause stress. You might feel stressed because of one big event or situation in your life, or it might be a build-up of lots of smaller things.



Learn more about  
**burnout** [in this video](#).

How stressed you feel in different situations may depend on factors on various levels like<sup>10</sup>:

- How comfortable or frustrated you feel in certain types of situations, or simply uncertainty about how to act in a particular situation (personal level)
- What else you are going through as well as your past experiences, and how situations confront you with your own biography (personal level)
- The amount of support you have from your colleagues and other people (interpersonal level)
- The resources you have available to you, such as time (workplace level)
- If clear rules, structures, or guidelines exist on how to deal with different situations (organisational level)

Some situations that do not bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress. This is because we are all influenced by different experiences. We also have different levels of support and ways of coping. Certain events might also make you feel stressed sometimes, but not every time.

Stress can occur in different areas of our lives.<sup>11</sup> These may include:

- **Personal**
- **Friends and family**
- **Employment and study**
- **Housing**
- **Money**
- **Social factors**

## **Burnout**

The term “burnout” was coined in 1974 by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. He used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in “helping” professions. Doctors and nurses, for example, who sacrifice themselves for others, would often end up being “burned out” – exhausted, listless, and unable to cope.<sup>12</sup>

The ICD-11 of the World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.<sup>13</sup> It is classified as a mismatch between the challenges of work and a person’s mental and physical resources, but is not recognised as a standalone medical condition.

### **Signs and symptoms of burnout**

There are three main areas of symptoms that are considered to be signs of burnout<sup>14</sup>:

- **Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion**
- **Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job**
- **Reduced professional efficacy**



Click [here](#) for an explanation video on the science behind post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), its symptoms and how the brain reacts to trauma.

## Vicarious trauma

### Definition of vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma is the effect of being exposed to someone else's trauma — trauma that you have not personally experienced, but you have learned about from others. The [Vicarious Trauma Institute](#) defines vicarious trauma as the “indirect exposure to trauma through a first-hand account or narrative of a traumatic event”.

Vicarious trauma is a term typically used when talking about clinicians, such as therapists, social workers, and other professionals. Anyone can also experience stress when hearing about a loved one's trauma. That stress is very valid and natural, and sometimes it can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health difficulties, like depression and anxiety.<sup>15</sup>

Vicarious trauma is also known by a handful of other names, including:

- Secondary traumatisation
- Secondary trauma
- Second-hand trauma
- Secondary traumatic stress

Vicarious trauma is not the same as PTSD, which refers to someone experiencing or witnessing trauma directly. While vicarious trauma and PTSD are not the same, the symptoms of PTSD and vicarious trauma can be quite similar.

### Signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma

Symptoms of vicarious trauma can be experienced physically, emotionally, and behaviourally.<sup>16</sup> According to a [2019 review](#), the symptoms of vicarious trauma can include:

- Unwelcome thoughts of client-induced imagery
- Nightmares
- Missing work
- Social withdrawal
- Avoiding traumatic disclosures from clients, leading to subpar clinical services
- Negative coping skills, both personally and professionally
- Hyperarousal to your safety and the safety of loved ones
- Avoiding physical intimacy
- Increasingly pessimistic worldview
- Loss of work-related motivation
- Distancing from spiritual beliefs
- Reduced longevity in the field
- Stress-related medical conditions

Vicarious trauma may also be linked with burnout.

### Causes of vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma can happen to people who engage with trauma survivors or witness traumatic events, especially on a repetitive basis.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, vicarious trauma is common among professionals known for helping others, like therapists, social workers, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and doctors.

## Risk factors for burnout and vicarious trauma

There are a number of factors that can increase the risk of burnout and vicarious trauma in the context of domestic violence. Some of them are personal, while others relate to the situation or work setting.<sup>18</sup>

### **Personal factors** include:

- Personality and coping styles (e.g., people who tend to avoid difficult emotions or situations or tend to see problems as overwhelming and unfixable)
- Personal history (e.g., experience of dealing with a situation similar to one's own (past) situation, identification with those affected)
- Current life circumstances (e.g., stresses in other aspects of life can add to the overall stress someone is experiencing, periods of personal illness)
- Social support (e.g., people who enjoy a strong social network tend to be more resilient to stress than people who are socially isolated)
- Work style (e.g., having unrealistic expectations of performance, difficulty in setting boundaries between work and other aspects of life, lack of balance between personal and work time)
- Spiritual resources (e.g., some people find connection with a higher source of meaning can improve their resilience to stressful situations)

### **Workplace factors** include:

- Working over a long period of time in the field (i.e., having repeated exposure to the traumatic stories of victims over time)
- Level of responsibility (e.g., feeling unable or insufficiently resourced to really help, being overburdened with complex cases)
- Inadequate supervision, training, and support structures (e.g., lack of opportunities to speak out, inability to influence decisions, inadequate time off, lack of supportive workplace culture, lack of knowledge regarding the potential for vicarious trauma)
- Inadequate time to debrief
- Challenging work conditions (e.g., remote locations, restricted access to recreation, exercise, or social supports, frequent travel, long hours)
- Competing demands (e.g., from budgets, victims, funders, and own family)

## Managing stress and building resilience

Being prepared for periods of stress can make it easier to get through them and knowing how to manage our wellbeing can help us recover after a stressful event. Resilience refers to our ability to manage stress. It is the process of



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Find more information on the **general strategies on how to improve self-care** in [Module 9](#).



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Find more information about **domestic violence in times of disasters** in [Module 7](#).

adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences (American Psychological Association).

There are things we can try to build our resilience against stress. But there are also factors that might make it harder to be resilient, such as experiencing discrimination or lacking support.<sup>19</sup>

## General strategies on how to improve self-care

The following strategies are recommended to improve self-care at work.<sup>20</sup>

- **Setting and maintaining boundaries**
- **Self-nurturing strategies**
- **Self-awareness**
- **Reflective practice**
- **Professional supervision**
- **Sleep strategies**

You can use these specific strategies to improve your self-care.<sup>21</sup>

- **Ask for help if you need it**
- **Take a break**
- **Have realistic expectations**
- **Up-skill and seek support**
- **Find balance and meaning**
- **Implement management support strategies and have policies and procedures in place**

### Excursus: Wellbeing during times of crises

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted existing structural inequalities throughout Europe, heightening the risks and vulnerabilities associated with domestic violence and revealing the limitations and obstacles within the support system. It has led to a widespread shift to remote services for professionals working with victims of domestic violence, often for the first time, and has posed challenges in maintaining the mental health and well-being of these professionals in remote settings.

## Helpful sources

They can be found [here](#).