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Find more information about the difficult situations in the context of domestic violence in [Module 9](#).

## Importance of self-care

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 in form of acceptance and without resignation.<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 with regard to<sup>2</sup>:

- Thinking
- Acting
- Feeling

### Excursus: Dealing with frustrations

Victims of domestic violence very often stay in abusive relationships and find it difficult to allow intervention for various reasons, one of them being a sense of lack of support. This can be exhausting, frustrating, and difficult to handle. Though professionals may feel frustration, they may be their first and only point of contact.<sup>3</sup>

As a professional working with victims of domestic violence, it is important to address frustration when it arises, taking into consideration the following points:

- 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.
- Remind yourself, that it is the victim's responsibility to leave an abuser, not yours.
- 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.



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



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Use this [self-assessment](#) to learn about your self-care needs by spotting patterns and recognising areas of your life that need more attention.

- 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.

## Strategies on how to improve self-care

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 and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies.<sup>4</sup>

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>5</sup>

Self-care activities are things you do to maintain good health and improve well-being. You will find that many of these activities are things you already do as part of your normal routine.

### Tips for maintaining and managing wellbeing at work<sup>6</sup>

- Actively engage in regular supervision and collective reflective practice.
- Reach out to someone. This could be your supervisor, a trusted friend or colleague, a counsellor or another support person.
- Find a way to escape physically or mentally including rest, reading, days off, holidays, walks, seeing friends, having fun, and doing things that make you laugh, playing with children and pets, and creative activities.
- Take your scheduled workday breaks, weekends, and annual leave.
- Evaluate your workspace to ensure it is conducive to wellbeing.
- Try to establish boundaries with the work required by the institution or company members that exceed your job functions.
- Practice active communication with your institution or company members about your personal and work situation and make individual or collective demands that you consider fair.
- Be kind and supportive to your colleagues and celebrate achievements.
- Practice self-compassion. In bearing witness to stories of abuse and violence, it is good to remember that an emotional response is also a human one. While it is important to maintain professional composure with victims, emotional responses related to abuse and violence are natural and appropriate. Staying connected with how you feel and

having self-compassion will help you to be resilient and sustain your work.

The following strategies are recommended to improve self-care at work.<sup>7</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>8</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



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Learn more about relaxation techniques in [Module 9](#).



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

### Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are helpful tools for coping with stress and promoting long-term health by slowing down the body and quieting the mind. Here are three relaxation techniques that can help you to reduce your stress-related symptoms and gain a better sense of control and well-being in your life<sup>9</sup>:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscular relaxation
- Relaxation response

### 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.

## Stress

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.<sup>10,11</sup>

Stress can be “acute” or “chronic”<sup>12</sup>:

- **Acute stress happens within a few minutes to a few hours** after 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



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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 do not get enough sleep**.

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 experience domestic violence yourself. Additionally, chronic stress can result from working with traumatised people and/or regular exposure to stressful situations at work.

### Stress and our body

Stress is our body's reaction to a pressure situation (acute or chronic). When we are exposed to stress, our body produces stress hormones that trigger a fight or flight response and activate our immune system. The body then reacts with an alarm response. The release of stress hormones (e.g., cortisol and adrenaline) in the brain puts the body on alert and increases blood pressure, breathing and heart rate, among other things.

### Signs and symptoms of chronic stress

Too much stress can leave us in a permanent stage of fight or flight, leaving us overwhelmed or unable to cope. Long term, this can affect our physical and mental health and 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.

The body tries to adapt to a **prolonged (chronic) stress situation**. The following symptoms often occur during this so-called **resistance phase**:

### Physical symptoms of chronic stress

Physical symptoms of stress can include<sup>13</sup>:

- Faster breathing and heartbeat
- Panic attacks
- Sleep problems
- Muscle aches and headaches

As a result of chronic stress, a **phase of exhaustion** occurs due to the constant excessive demands: The immune system is less efficient, people fall ill more quickly or more often. The risk of developing mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders, burnout or depression also increases.<sup>14</sup>

### Emotional and mental symptoms due to chronic stress

If people are stressed, they might feel these symptoms the most often:

- Feeling irritable, angry, impatient or wound-up
- Being anxious, nervous or afraid
- Unable to enjoy yourself (e.g., you have lost your sense of humour)
- A sense of dread
- Unable to concentrate



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



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

- Unable to remember things, or make your memory feel slower than usual
- Constantly worry or have feelings of dread
- Grind your teeth or clench your jaw
- Experience sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- Withdraw from people around you

Often, people with chronic stress try to manage it with unhealthy behaviours.<sup>15</sup>

### Unhealthy behaviours

If people are stressed, they may observe in their daily life the following:

- Smoke
- Use recreational drugs
- Drink alcohol more than they usually would

### 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. You can have stress from good challenges as well as bad ones.

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. Some of these situations may be considered even as happy events, but they can still feel very stressful (e.g., getting married or starting a new job).

Stress can occur in different areas of our lives.<sup>16</sup> These may include:

- Personal factors
- Relationship factors
- Employment and study factors
- Housing factors
- Financial factors
- Social factors

## Burnout

Some people who go through severe stress may experience suicidal feelings. This can be very distressing. In such situations, it is important to seek professional help, as integrating self-care routines like meditation and exercise may not be sufficient. Primary care physicians can be the first point of contact to help those affected to find ways out of this stress spiral can help navigate these challenging times safely.

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, would often end up being “burned out” – exhausted, listless, and unable to cope.<sup>17</sup>



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

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>18</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.

Burnout can lead to **anxiety, anger, or panic**, which may impair ability of those affected to function properly. Finally, chronic stress results in a complete breakdown, which may manifest as severe fatigue, depression, or total withdrawal from activities.

### Symptoms that may indicate burnout

There are three main areas of symptoms that are considered to be signs of burnout<sup>19</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

### Diagnosis of burnout

In 1981, Maslach and Jackson developed the first widely used instrument for assessing burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). It remains by far the most commonly used instrument to assess the condition. The MBI operationalises burnout as a three-dimensional syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment, or instruction), and reduced personal accomplishment.<sup>20</sup>

The MBI originally focused on social professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers). Since that time, the MBI has been used for a wider variety of workers (e.g., health professionals). The instrument or its variants are now employed with many other professions.

## Secondary traumatisation

### Definition of secondary traumatisation

"Trauma" is an ancient Greek word meaning wound or injury. In psychology, trauma refers to a severe psychological injury. Trauma often arises from experiences where a person is subjected to significant threat and helplessness.<sup>21</sup> Secondary traumatisation is the impact of knowledge about another person's traumatic experience on your own psyche; i.e., a trauma that you did not experience yourself. This occurs usually at a distance from the original trauma and unconscious.

Secondary traumatisation is also known by a handful of other names, including:

- Vicarious traumatisation
- Secondary trauma
- Second-hand trauma

- Secondary traumatic stress

Sometimes it can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health difficulties, like depression and anxiety.<sup>22</sup>

### **Signs and symptoms of secondary traumatisation**

Symptoms of secondary traumatisation can be experienced physically, emotionally, and behaviourally:<sup>23</sup>

- Nightmares with reliving the trauma material of the traumatised person
- Social withdrawal
- Stress-related medical conditions
- Flashbacks stemming from their own traumatic experiences (those affected get a racing heart and dry mouth, can sweat and be just as frightened as they were in the original situation).

Secondary traumatisation can happen to people who engage with trauma survivors or witness traumatic events, especially on a repetitive basis.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, secondary traumatisation is common among professionals known for helping others, like therapists, social workers, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, teachers, and doctors.

### **Who may be particularly at risk of being affected by secondary traumatisation?**

- Persons with own previous and unresolved traumas (e.g., domestic violence)
- Situation paralleling one own's life situation
- Own high level of stress

### **How can you prevent secondary traumatisation?**

- Good self-care
- Good working conditions and collegial teamwork
- Tackling of conscious trauma with professional help

## Helpful sources

They can be found [here](#).