


For helpers: Suggestions on self-care

You are working with refugees or other traumatized people. You are concerned about their fates trying to be of help, to alleviate their suffering – an important task which can be energy-sapping, as well as gratifying, or both at once. On this page helpers can find information on how they can (and must!) protect themselves in order to keep committing themselves to this important work in the long run without being harmed and without developing similar symptoms as traumatized persons (so-called “secondary traumatization“). You will find indications as to warning signals your body or soul may send out in case of being overwhelmed by this work.

You will also get suggestions on how to make it easier for you to deal with traumatized people helping them to cope a little better with their traumatic experience at the same time.


(Further information is available under <http://www.refugee-trauma.help/de/ueber-trauma>)

 **Your personal motivation is your Source of strength for your work being, at the same time a Threat to your emotional health**, as you are at risk not to be able to perceive, not to accept and finally to pass your own limits.

Please sort the following out for yourself: Why am I committed to this work (your very own motivation, apart from any professional motivation)?

- I want to make a contribution to reduce misery
- Members of my family were also refugees
- Helping others does my heart good
- It helps me to socialize with others
- Many other people do the same
- Because I get something back in return, e.g. gratitude. (Be careful: This may not always and immediately be the case)
- Because bad things also happened to me – this is why I want to help others

Auch unter den Helfenden gibt es traumatisierte Menschen (körperliche Gewalterfahrung, Kriegserfahrung, Vernachlässigung, sexuelle Gewalterfahrung, Unfälle, plötzlicher Tod naher Angehöriger, Krebserkrankung) manche Traumata wurden verarbeitet, manche verdrängt.

 Among helpers there may also be traumatized persons (with experience of physical violence, war, neglect, sexual violence, accidents, sudden death of near relatives, cancer). Sometimes the trauma has been processed, sometimes it has only been suppressed

Signs of helpers' "mental overload":

Burnout: State of chronic fatigue mostly due to work overload. The initially high commitment of helpers for refugees is even increased until they lose social contacts and withdraw from other activities. As a result, productivity and the ability to handle stress are reduced.


Finally, persons affected do not feel capable of continuing their work, enjoying anything and may perceive everything (including their own lives) as senseless.

Secondary traumatization: Helpers themselves are suffering from trauma symptoms, e.g., listening to victims relating their experiences or witnessing how refugees are treated by authorities. The memory may activate and bring to the fore their own traumatic experience.

Compassion fatigue: Helpers are increasingly unmoved or even bored by accounts of burdensome events, they react cynically, accuse the victims.

Risk factors:

- ⊗ Expecting too much from ourselves
- ⊗ Chronic overload
- ⊗ Recurring memories of own trauma
- ⊗ Dysfunctional coping strategies
(alcohol, work overload, emotional numbness, social isolation...)
- ⊗ To be thrown in at the deep end being left alone
- ⊗ No supervision nor therapy
- ⊗ Traumatizations of refugees and their consequences are being denied by superiors and social environment
- ⊗ Institutions do not treat refugees as individual beings, but as a crowd of people (an additional burden) that has to be processed or handled according to regulations, but without respect or consideration for their individual dignity or situation
- ⊗ Co-workers or superiors do not deal appropriately with compassion ("You're a whimp")
- ⊗ Too much work

 **Given the high levels of insecurity traumatized persons are facing, your (the helpers') continuity (health and mental equilibrium) is especially important for them!**

How can and must I take care of myself?

- Do regular imagination exercises, that is, e.g., recall positive things that you have experienced and which are of help to you (instructions, texts and audio files to be found on the refugee-trauma.help website).
- Partner up with others, do not fight alone!
- Do not feel responsible for every assignment (“Is this really part of my job? Can I delegate?”)
- Know and respect the limits of my task.
- Recognize and accept my own limits at an early stage.
- Spirituality (realizing, e.g., that we are guided and supported by God, Allah or human principles)
- “Pack away” burdening images and emotions after work (also see “Container”, “Inner Garden” or “Clarifying Bath” exercise on this website).

Note: Just as recurrent recollections of traumatic events severely influence your hormones, brain and, thus, emotions and body functions in a negative way, positive imaginations or memories which you visualize as realistically as possible, have a beneficial effect on you.

- When in contact with traumatized persons, do not ask them for details in order not to have them relive the trauma causing new emotional outbursts and the feeling lack of power. This is also important as to prevent you as a helper from having to deal with those traumatizing images. It may even be important to respectfully distract them from the subject once you notice the person affected has strong emotions or threatens to lose control. (Just talking about the trauma may re-traumatize them and even cause a “secondary” traumatization in helpers)
- When being exposed to strong emotions of your counterpart, turn sideways in order to let those emotions pass by.
- After work, look for relief with others (without talking about frightening details)
- Engage in physical activity (in order to reduce stress hormones)
- Enjoy doing pleasurable things, have fun.
- Exchange views with other helpers as a spontaneous way to find relief
- Participate in collegial intervention in order to find a more targeted relief
- Have sufficient sleep and eat good food
- Take a break now and then from working with refugees
- Engage in meditation, yoga ...
- STAY IN CONTACT with your friends.

- Get professional help (supervision) to support your work with refugees and to support your personally at an early stage.

Note: Stamina is an important quality when working with refugees (marathon vs. sprint). You need to pace yourself even though at the beginning you may feel the need to do everything and help everywhere (a feeling that will probably be right on target). It is still important to concentrate on one consistent and long-term activity.

Make a list of your individual resources:

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Make a list of your individual warning signals

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