

# Self-care for clinicians working with Emergency Service Workers

## Practitioner Self-Care Tips

Working within the emergency services can involve exposure to potentially traumatic events that involve threats to one's own life, as well as exposure to the injury, trauma, and death of others. Given the nature of emergency service work, clinicians working with emergency workers are likely to be exposed to images and stories of trauma, which have the potential to impact you. It is important to understand the stressors inherent in working with emergency workers and be aware of the potential impact on your mental health.

## Risks for Clinicians in working with ESWs

Working with emergency workers can be extremely rewarding, but due to possibility of secondary exposure to trauma experienced by emergency worker clients, it can also result in the development of vicarious trauma and burnout.

Practitioners may also face the risk of "moral injury" when working with trauma impacted individuals. Moral injury can arise when practitioners feel as though they have done something in the course of their professional duties that does not fit with their values, or goes against their moral code. This can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and even disgust, as well as anxiety, sadness, anger, and self-doubt. It is important to be aware of these risks, and monitor yourself for signs that you are experiencing the impacts of working with individuals impacted by trauma.

## A gentle reminder: Take the time to check in with yourself

As a health practitioner, to take care of others, it is important to be aware of your own level of stress and implement good self-care. It is critical to take the time to routinely check in with yourself, and develop and implement your own self-care plan. By observing simple self-care strategies, you can maintain your mental health and wellbeing when working with clients who present challenging and emotional material.



## Signs that you may be experiencing the impacts of working with traumatic material include:

- Experiencing guilt, shame or self doubt
- Being preoccupied with thoughts of work or clients outside of the work context
- Loss of hope, or becoming pessimistic about yourself, your clients or the world in general
- Feeling numb, detached, or isolating yourself
- Feeling low, flat, sad or losing interest in things you previously enjoyed
- Experiencing lack of motivation, or feeling fatigued
- Insomnia or experiencing nightmares
- Spend time with people you care about - even if it can only be 'virtually'. Sometimes you will want to be alone, but try not to become too isolated.
- Journal your feelings.
- Seek professional supervision or peer support.
- Maintain strong boundaries at work. Recognise your limits – everybody has them. Remind yourself that staying within your limits supports your wellbeing and makes you feel more effective at work.
- Remember to modify your self-care plan as needed.

## Practise what you preach!

Your self-care plan may include some of the following strategies to manage your stress:

- Recognise that the work you are doing is stressful, and that you may have a physical and emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to have a reaction, but also remember your strengths.
- Look after yourself by getting plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep) and regular exercise, and by eating regular, well-balanced meals.
- Minimise your intake of alcohol, caffeine or nicotine and avoid the use of non-prescription drugs. Use all prescription and over-the-counter medications as indicated.
- Make time for relaxation – whether it's listening to music, taking a bath, meditation, yoga, or breathing exercises.
- Try making a timetable for each day, including some exercise, enjoyable activities, and relaxation.

## Seeking Support

If you've tried these strategies and things still aren't improving after a couple of weeks, or if you are having difficulty coping, it is important to reach out for professional support. This can include speaking to your GP or mental health professional.

You should also reach out for professional support if you are experiencing disturbed sleep, withdrawal from family/ friends, increased use of substances, or thoughts of harming yourself or others. Making the decision to access professional assistance can help you to regain emotional strength and resilience.

## Further resources

- You can find more resources to assist with managing the impacts of working with individuals experiencing trauma on the Phoenix Australia website: [phoenixaustralia.org](http://phoenixaustralia.org).