

*National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*  
**Self-Care and Self-Help Following Disasters**

*A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet*

**Practicing Lifestyle Balance**

(Excerpted from: Saakvitne, K. W., & Pearlman, L. A. (Eds.). 1996. *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization*. New York: Norton).

There are many ways to restore lifestyle balance, and keeping track of and making progress with as many of the following changes is a good way to regain balance after having been exposed to or witnessed cumulative traumatic experiences:

**Physical Self-Care**

- Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast, lunch, dinner)
- Eat healthily
- Exercise
- Get regular medical care for prevention
- Get regular medical care when needed
- Take time off when sick
- Get massages
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity that is fun
- Take time to be sexual--with yourself, with a partner
- Get enough sleep
- Wear clothes you like
- Take vacations
- Take day trips or mini-vacations
- Make time away from telephones

**Psychological Self-Care**

- Make time for self-reflection
- Have your own personal psychotherapy
- Write in a journal
- Read literature that is unrelated to work
- Do something at which you are not expert or in charge
- Decrease stress in your life
- Notice your inner experiences -- listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
- Let others know different aspects of you
- Engage your intelligence in a new area, e.g., go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports event, auction, theater performance
- Practice receiving from others
- Be curious
- Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes

## **Emotional Self-Care**

- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Give yourself affirmations, praise yourself
- Find ways to increase your sense of self-esteem
- Reread favorite books, review favorite movies
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places, and seek them out
- Allow yourself to cry
- Find things to make you laugh
- Express your outrage in social action, letters, donations, marches, protests
- Play with children

## **Spiritual Self-Care**

- Make time for reflection
- Spend time with nature
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Be open to inspiration
- Cherish your optimism and hope
- Be aware of nonmaterial aspects of life
- Try at times not to be in charge or the expert
- Be open to not knowing
- Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- Meditate
- Pray
- Sing
- Spend time with children
- Have experiences of awe
- Contribute to causes in which you believe
- Read inspirational literature (talks, music, etc.)

### *When to Seek Help*

Several studies have pointed out that following a terroristic event such as the Oklahoma City bombing, many of those in closest proximity to the disaster do not believe that they need help and will not seek out services, despite reporting significant emotional distress (Sprang, 2000). Sprang lists several potential reasons for this:

Some people may feel that they are better off than those more affected and that they, therefore, should not be so upset.

Some may not seek help because of pride or because they think that distress indicates weakness of some sort.

Some individuals may not define services they receive as mental-health intervention, especially if such intervention is unsolicited (e.g., lectures, sermons, discussions, community rituals). Indeed, because the goal of many disaster mental-health workers is to have interventions be a seamless, integrated part of an overall disaster effort, those who receive these services may not recognize them as mental-health interventions. Many individuals are more apt to seek informal support from family and friends, which may not be sufficient to prevent long-term distress for some.