

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

Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity that is fun

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

Write in a journal

Read literature that is unrelated to work or school

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 non-material 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

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.