

Volunteers and Helpers – Self Care

It's important to help others during an emergency, but it's also important to take care of yourself. If you push yourself too hard, you may burn out – become ill, physically or emotionally exhausted or depressed.

Taking care of yourself during an emergency is anything but selfish. In fact, it's a very responsible thing to do, because it means you can remain effective in helping others.

Things to remember when helping out in an emergency

- Understand that nobody involved in an emergency or disaster is untouched by it; and sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions.
- You may not want to leave until the work is finished and may try to override your own fatigue with dedication and determination.
- You may deny your body's need for food, rest and recovery time.
- You may feel emotions more fully or less fully than you usually do.
- You'll often feel the pain of the victims and may experience this as secondary trauma – or “compassion fatigue.”
- Understand that you are not the only one who can help in this situation – you're part of the team of caregivers.

Tips on taking care of yourself when helping in an emergency

- Don't over-exert or over commit yourself.
- Get enough rest, exercise different muscles and maintain a healthy diet.
- Avoid excessive junk food, caffeine or alcohol.
- Make sure you take time for yourself. Taking a short break, away from the crisis and stress, can help you maintain your physical and emotional energy.
- Practice self-awareness – learn to recognize and heed the warning signs of physical and emotional fatigue.
- Talk about how you are feeling with your co-workers during appropriate times.
- Try to avoid over-identifying with victims' pain, grief, or struggles – it can hamper your effective helping skills.
- Look for the positive and set realistic goals for your volunteer time commitment.
- Rotate what you do, from frontline work to support jobs – it'll ease physical and mental stress.
- Stay in touch with family and friends who are not involved in the crisis.

Spot the 10 Signs of Stress:

1. Headaches, muscle tension, exhaustion
2. Changes in eating or sleeping habits
3. Lack of concentration
4. Tendency to isolate yourself
5. Difficulty relaxing
6. Anger and other mood swings
7. Alcohol or drug abuse
8. Relationship problems
9. Feelings of shame, failure, guilt or helplessness
10. Heart palpitations, chest pains, grinding or clenching teeth

If you find yourself over-extended or feel overwhelming stress, you need to make use of assistance programs yourself. Trained professionals are available to help you:

- Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services: 1-866-367-3276 (1-866-FOR-FARM), toll free; www.ruralsupport.ca
- Klinik Community Health Centre 24-hour Crisis Line: 204-786-8686 in Winnipeg; or 1-888-322-3019 toll free; www.de-stress.ca
- Health Links – Info Santé can help you find resources through your local regional health authority or community mental health services office: 204-788-8200 in Winnipeg; or 1-888-315-9257 toll free.