

Preventing and Addressing Burnout during COVID-19

Although no one knows the duration of this crisis, caring for clients during COVID-19 will be a marathon, not a sprint.

Rigorous self-care is essential to the work. We must take the time to recharge for ourselves and come together as teams to take care of our colleagues.

What Leaders Can Do

Leaders must take certain actions to create a healthy environment for workers, which include:

Developing concise, actionable criteria for triaging the most appropriate clients for your services; clarify and information decrease work stress load

Procuring necessary equipment and resources for staff to do their job most efficiently and effectively, especially if work location and expectations have changed

Understanding the “stretch” case load your team can accommodate and do your best to structure staffing accordingly

Rotating work duties and supports to allow for staff self-care

Scheduling regular and supportive communication via email (and/or in person) which includes relevant guidelines, education, and HR information

Supporting flexible scheduling for work life balance including attention to:

- Child care needs,
- Elder care needs,
- Mental health care, and
- Physical health and wellbeing

When possible, **establishing a work-time or work-load threshold** (and planning for coverage) beyond which no employee, even during COVID-19, should work

Establishing Peer Support structures: Peer support can be incredibly helpful, since peers

may recognize signs of burnout and changes in you before you recognize them in yourself.

Adding decision makers. When making decisions related to necessary health and safety that hold unpredictable, and sometimes dire, outcomes, the weight of those decisions adds stress. Key to mitigating this stress is ensuring that no professional makes these weighty decisions as individual judgments.

Establishing clinical supervision/support for front line staff during COVID-19 when needed.

Preparing for traumatic incident response: leadership should also be prepared to set aside time and space for debriefing particularly traumatic incidents.

Reinforcing time off: leaders should reinforce the expectation that time off on the schedule is time off (except in extreme emergencies), and individuals should do their best to adhere. During a crisis, brains can enter “flight, fight, or freeze” mode and people might find it scary to disengage, lest they miss something. But this means no time to decompress and recharge, when finding times of normalcy is essential for sustainability in the long haul.

Remember to find ways to reduce isolation among your teams, even virtually, such as:

- Establishing a drop-in time and/or staff support sessions, led by trained colleagues, social workers or clinicians;
- Establishing a weekly virtual open “team check in time” with no firm agenda
- During regular team meetings, make sure to include:
 - Regular moments of pause for relaxation, breathing, or other mindfulness practices
 - Checking in at the start of each meeting with each team member about how they are doing, potential concerns with loved ones, child care issues, or other things that need to happen for next week/until the next meeting.
 - Provides time for periodic opportunities for creativity or fun to form connection and relationship during separation and stress.

What Individual Professionals Can Do

Actively engage mental health support now by doing at least one of the following:

- Become familiar with available mental health resources
- Establish a relationship with a mental health provider ([find list here](#)) or
- Develop an action plan with your existing mental health provider

Immediately communicate gaps in services or protocol that cause job stress.

As circumstances with COVID-19 become more stressful, individuals should communicate anything – particularly programmatic/services gaps – that is causing undue distress to their supervisor(s).

Avoid unhealthy coping mechanisms – whether junk food, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, etc. Individuals should forgive themselves if they do indulge, but then make sure to find their way back to healthful strategies.

Remember TIME OFF is TIME OFF. Do not work beyond a certain threshold. Engage family and friends to help hold oneself accountable for carving out non-work time.

Check Out More Mental Health Resources:

- ✓ [Preparing for the Coronavirus by Taking Care of Your Whole Self](#)
- ✓ [Staying Mentally Healthy During Self-Isolation or Quarantine](#)

Other resources are available on the Department of Mental Health and Vermont Department of Health's websites.

What to do when in “survival mode”

1. Please remember that you are not alone. Given the immensity of the situation, simply doing the next right thing is the best many of us can hope for.
2. Accept that anxiety and grief in a global pandemic is an appropriate response.
3. Recognize that under pressure, many of us are more resilient than we give ourselves credit for.
4. Stick with the ADLs. The idea of “self-care” may seem impossible right now, but even in survival mode, the basic Activities of Daily Living (or ADLs) are non-negotiable:
 - a. Eat (as healthily as you can)
 - b. Hydrate
 - c. Sleep
 - d. Take a shower (daily hygiene)
 - e. Walk if you can
 - f. Avoid alcohol or illicit substances
5. Keep looking for moments of mindfulness. Maintaining an orientation towards the present can help keep you grounded when you start spinning in your mind.

Visit the Agency of Human Services' [YouTube page](#) for a series of mindfulness meditations and movement!

Warning Signs of Burnout

The symptoms of burnout can be complex and may not look the same in everyone. However, experiencing one or more of the following either to an intense degree or over a sustained period of time should be a warning sign:

- Sadness, depression, or apathy
- Easy frustration
- Blaming of others, irritability
- Anger, cynicism
- Lacking feelings, indifference
- Inability to focus
- Isolation or disconnection from others that impacts your relationship to a troubling extent (while it is normal to be more irritable with loved ones, it is worth noting if you are lashing out, or finding yourself nearing emotional or physical abuse)
- Inappropriate humor and sarcasm, such as using gallows humor with clients and families
- Guilt, self blame for having more than others you serve or help
- Poor self-care (hygiene)
- Tired, exhausted, or overwhelmed; alternately, insomnia but then not feeling tired
- Grandiosity, the work becomes the center of your identity; the more important the work, the more important we become
- Feeling like:
 - A failure
 - Nothing you can do will help
 - You are not doing your job well
 - You need alcohol/other drugs to cope
- Thinking unsafe thoughts, such as looking for physical or emotional scapegoats (e.g., “if only something could happen to me, then I would not be well enough to work”), or considering self-harm

If the above feel familiar to you, you may be experiencing true and sustained burnout.

Please do any of the following:

- Confide in someone you trust (i.e., doctor, clergy, counselor, colleague).
- Contact the help listed below

You
Are
Not
Alone

Available 24/7 – If you need help, text VT to 741741

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
is available 24/7 at 800-273-8255

Dial 2-1-1 to find mental health services in your area

Vermont Peer Support Line – open 24 / 7
Call or text 833-888-2557



In addition, there are many free mental health resources that health care professionals and individuals can access:

- Disaster Distress Helpline 1-800-5990, or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- SAMHSA National Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- National Institute of Mental Health Crisis Text Line 741741 (text “HELLO”)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness 1-800-950-6264
- Veteran Crisis Line 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and press 1, or text 838255