

COVID-19 —Tips for Self-Care as We Return to Work

Whether you've been working from home for many weeks, or temporarily laid off, the idea of getting back into a routine in the midst of a global health crisis can be challenging and a source of stress for many. During this time, we have been subject to a number of conditions that have undoubtedly been difficult to manage. Worries about the health of ourselves, or loved ones, financial concerns, coping with grief or helping others do the same and intense workloads, all while trying to balance the needs of our families is a lot to handle. Additionally, there are all those question marks looming about what "getting back to normal" will look like.



With this in mind, stress prevention and management are as critical as ever in order to stay well for ourselves and others. There are important steps we can take during this process to help ease ourselves into an optimistic future. Before we can do that, it's important to understand the roles of compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

Understand and Identify Compassion Fatigue, Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress

It's normal to experience stress during a crisis. When stress builds up it can cause:

- **Compassion Fatigue** – For those whose work involves helping others, compassion fatigue is stress resulting from interactions with people experiencing trauma or suffering. It is about the actual work you do. People new to the helping profession are often more at risk for this as they have not built up their arsenal of resiliency and coping skills. However, even seasoned workers can experience compassion fatigue when a personal issue begins to impact them and burdens their ability to cope with stressors. It can contribute to one experiencing burnout, however, while compassion fatigue relates to the work done, burnout is attributed more to the work environment.
- **Burnout** – exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration. It has defined organization drivers which should be considered when trying to determine if the work environment is contributing to the issues we may be experiencing. These include:
 - **Workload** – is it reasonable, manageable & fair?
 - **Efficiency**— are practices and procedures as efficient as they can be?

- **Flexibility and/or control in the workplace:**
 - over schedules, decisions, & work we do
 - culture and values of the organization
 - work-life integration
 - the community at work
 - meaning in the work we do
- **Secondary traumatic stress** – Traumatic Stress reactions and symptoms typically result from direct exposure to trauma. But did you know you can experience secondary trauma? The flood of news reporting illustrating the death toll, collective suffering and financial free-fall exposes us 24 hours a day to intense stress. Coping techniques like taking breaks, eating healthy foods, exercising, and using the buddy system can help prevent and reduce symptoms you may experience. Recognize the signs of the above conditions in yourself and others to be sure those who need a break or need help can get the appropriate assistance.

Signs of Compassion Fatigue:

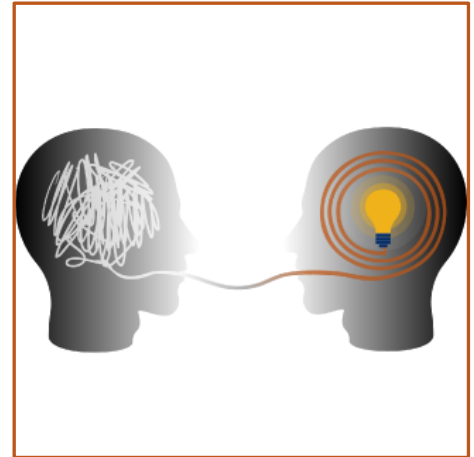
- Depersonalization
- Feelings of inequity toward the therapeutic or caregiver relationship
- Irritability
- Feelings of self-contempt
- Feeling like you are a failure
- Feeling like you are not doing your job well
- Lack of enjoyment in your work

Signs of Burnout:

- Sadness, depression, or apathy
- Easily frustrated / angered
- Blaming of others
- Lacking feelings, indifferent
- Isolation or disconnection from others
- Poor self-care (hygiene)
- Cynicism and detachment
- Pessimism
- Lack of productivity and poor performance

Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress:

- Excessive worry or fear about something bad happening
- Easily startled, or “on guard” all the time
- Physical signs of stress (e.g. racing heart)
- Nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation
- The feeling that others’ trauma is yours



Get support from team or family members: Develop a Support or Buddy System

In a buddy system, two or more people partner together to support each other, and monitor each other’s stress, workload, and safety.

- Get to know each other. Talk about background, interests, hobbies, and family. Identify each other’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Keep an eye on each other. Try to work in the same location if you can.
- Set up times to check-in with each other. Listen carefully and share experiences and feelings. Acknowledge tough situations and recognize accomplishments, even small ones.
- Offer to help with basic needs such as sharing supplies and transportation.
- Monitor each other’s workloads. Encourage each other to take breaks. Share opportunities for stress relief (rest, routine sleep, exercise, and deep breathing).
- Communicate your buddy’s basic needs and limits to leadership – make your buddy feel “safe” to speak up.

Other Self-Care Techniques

- If possible, try to limit working hours each day
- Work in teams when you can and limit amount of time working alone.
- Write in a journal.
- Talk to family, friends, supervisors, and teammates about your feelings and experiences.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques.
- Maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise.
- Know that it is okay to set boundaries and say “no.”
- Avoid or limit caffeine and use of alcohol.

It is important to remind yourself

- It is not selfish to take breaks.
- The needs of others are not more important than your own needs and well-being.
- Working extra hours does not mean you will make your best contribution.
- There are other people who can help.

People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during this time and monitor for any new symptoms.

Call the Ulliance Employee Assistance Program at 800.448.8326—we can help!