

TIPS FOR REDUCING STRESS IN THE FACE OF COVID -19*

The current global pandemic, with its accompanying uncertainty and disruptions in work life, creates a situation where APS staff are potentially seeing more and different kinds of trauma in their clients and may increasingly experience secondary trauma, stress, and burn out. Whereas APS staff were previously exposed to secondary trauma from their clients, they are now dealing with their own fear and trauma, as well as that of their clients. This level of stress is expected to increase as states “open up,” and staff are increasingly exposed to the personal danger of infection from the public and clients’ trauma related to the pandemic. This Tip Sheet is designed to help supervisors and workers cope with this challenge.

This document includes some basic definitions and explanations of the effects of stress, trauma, and burn-out, tips for supervisors to use to help their workers cope with these challenges, tips for worker self-care, a Pocket Card for COVID-19 Crisis information, and a list of resources.

Trauma Basics

It is important to understand what trauma, secondary trauma, stress, and burn out are, how they may be manifested, and why it is important for the agency to address them.

Definitions:

- Trauma: An *event*, series of events, or set of circumstances *experienced* by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting *adverse effects* on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma-informed>.
- Secondary traumatic stress: stress reactions and symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual’s traumatic experiences, rather than from exposure directly to a traumatic event. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>
- Stress: emotional response, typically caused by an external trigger. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-anxiety-difference>
- Burnout: state of extreme emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>

Trauma, secondary trauma, stress, and burnout can be manifested as:

- Worry
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Hypervigilance
- Exhaustion
- Sleep problems
- Difficulty focusing
- Reduced productivity
- Sadness
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Depression
- Anger
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Feeling Isolated

Trauma, secondary trauma, stress, and burnout can lower work efficiency, decrease productivity, and diminish workers’ sense of personal accomplishment. In the context of your workforce, this can result in:

- Increased absenteeism
- Negative attitudes toward the job or fellow workers
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Workforce attrition
- Decrease in personal initiative; and
- Difficulty gaining team consensus.

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Trauma-Informed Supervision

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Center for Trauma-Informed Care has identified six core principles of what it means to be trauma-informed. The chart below is intended to help supervisors employ these principles in working with their staff.

The Six Core Principles*	How supervisors can apply the principles of Trauma-Informed Care during COVID-19 /recovery
Safety	<p>Create a space where the worker feels safe—both physically and psychologically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the impact of COVID on the worker during supervision and make it safe to report feelings of trauma, stress, and burnout. • Check-in with the worker regularly about their stress level. • Listen without judgment. Trauma is very individualized: What is traumatic for one might trigger resilience in another. • Provide resources such as Employee Assistance Programs, health care services, tip sheets, etc. • Provide the equipment needed to be safe (e.g., personal protective equipment, laptops or tablets) • Provide updated information about how to make home visits safer as this information becomes available. • Focus on the positive whenever you can. It is crucially important that you remain optimistic. • Explain the Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act, so workers are aware of this safety net. • Early intervention in trauma is extremely important to mitigate the long-term effects on the individual. So, address debilitating trauma or stress symptoms as soon as possible.
Trustworthiness and Transparency	<p>Create a team where workers know what to expect from you and what you expect from them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain changes as much ahead of time as possible so that you are viewed as trustworthy and transparent, and the job is felt to be predictable. • Develop contingency plans with your administration and your team about what happens if workers become ill, are reassigned or affected by lay-off, etc. How will caseloads be disseminated? Can some workers be reassigned for desk duty (e.g., while isolating because of exposure, if they are high risk or have a family member who is high risk, etc.)? • Tell workers what you know, what you don’t know, and when you expect to know more. Uncertainty creates stress. Information reduces it. Explaining what you don’t know makes you trustworthy. • Provide clear guidance regarding new policies and procedures for the workflow and the agency’s current expectations but ... • Be flexible about the different personal challenges that workers face (e.g., homeschooling kids while trying to work, sick family members) and try to balance productivity with emotional and physical health challenges. Supporting staff now leads to long-term productivity. • Don’t micro-manage, trust your workers to be as productive as they can, given the situation, but do provide non-judgmental support and resources
Peer Support	<p>Provide opportunities for workers to support one and other*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage teaming and problem solving together

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide agency approved teaming software such as Goggle chat, Microsoft teams, or Zoom meetings and provide training on how to use it. • Encourage social connectivity between workers (e.g., birthday celebrations, achievement recognition, shared humor) • A peer mentor may be helpful to a struggling worker. The peers can check-in and share their struggles and methods for addressing them <p>*Remember your own self-care and reach out to <u>your</u> peers for support!</p>
Collaboration and mutuality	<p>Work TOGETHER with workers to address stress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gently point out signs of stress and burnout. The worker may not themselves be aware of just how stressed they are feeling (e.g., burn-out can creep up gradually, and you may notice symptoms before the worker) • Normalize trauma-related symptoms. Self -disclosure on your part can be helpful, but be sure to end on a hopeful note. • Explore with the worker ideas about how their stress can be reduced. (See the list of Worker Self Care Tips) Ask for input. Do they need more flexible hours? Do they need a change of assignment? Did they cancel their vacation because of sheltering in place and need a few days off? • Take direction from the worker on what he/she needs to reduce stress and then let the worker put their plan in place (empowering them) • Be readily available to your staff; this is especially important now as workers are working from home and will need to touch base in a different way than previously
Empowerment, voice, and choice	<p>Provide information about self-care and empower workers to choose/use techniques that work for them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind those who are social workers that, according to NASW, “exposure to stories of traumatic experiences, stressful workplace climates, having concerns for safety, and the increase in practice demands makes practicing self-care not just an idea, but a professional and ethical obligation.” • Educate yourself on Trauma-Informed Care so you can help workers provide this care to clients who are experiencing trauma- and by extension- teach workers about self-care.
Being responsive to cultural, historical and gender issues	<p>Be aware that previous trauma or discrimination can be triggered by the current situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triggering of earlier traumas are being reported. Allow individuals with a history of trauma or discrimination the opening to discuss that harm in terms of its current effect on their physical and mental health. • Take care to be fair. Although you need to be flexible about each worker’s personal challenges, the perception of favoritism can be triggering to someone who has experienced ongoing discrimination. So, you need to have an objective rationale for any special accommodations.

*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014

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Worker Self Care Tips

The tips below are provided to help APS workers care for themselves so that they are able to care for their clients.

- **Find a work “Buddy”:** Set up times to check-in, support each other, problem-solve together, watch for signs of stress in each other.
- **Keep work and home separate:** This can be tough when working from home, but when you “clock out,” focus on your family and friends and put work aside. Consider activities that “ends” the day for you, such as taking a walk, playing with a child and/or pet, calling friends or family, etc.
- **Acknowledge how scary the situation is:** You are only human, and it is ok that you are affected by all the current uncertainty.
- **Let go of previous expectations:** The new normal means you may be working from home with multiple challenges (childcare, homeschooling children, sick family members, etc.) You may have to accept that you can’t do everything you did from the office.
- **Practice positive affirmations:** Put a positive spin on your internal dialogue. Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can in a difficult situation.
- **Watch your lifestyle:** Eat healthy, get adequate sleep, exercise, and watch your news consumption.
- **Do not make BIG life decisions** when under stress but **make lots of little decisions** to keep/regain a sense of control when so much is out of your control.
- **Talk about your feelings/concerns** with supervisors, co-workers, and others in your support network!
- **Practice breathing and relaxation techniques like yoga or meditation.**
- **Set boundaries:** Do not let yourself get overextended. It is ok to say no.
- **Laugh:** Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others; watch a comedy, share a joke. Things are serious, but it’s ok to laugh.
- **Cry:** A good cry relieves stress, so go ahead and cry.
- **Do things you enjoy** to refresh and recharge yourself; this can be as simple as reading a book or checking your Instagram.
- **Use your creativity:** keep a journal, paint a picture, play music, whatever puts you into a creative “flow” and gets you out of your head.
- **Take breaks:** Get away from your desk and go for a short walk outside.
- **Practice gratitude:** By focusing on the positive, you will short circuit your negative thoughts.
- **Recovery/getting back to normal takes time:** It may be two steps forward, one step back but you will make progress.

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Pocket Card for COVID-19 Crisis - March 2020

Dr. Beth Hudnall Stamm developed this revised "pocket card" about caring for yourself in the face of difficult work for the current COVID-19 health crisis. (See below or [download at this link.](#))

CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.

10 things to do each day

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Vary the work you do.
4. Do some light exercise.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate, or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

For More Information, see your supervisor or visit www.istss.org,
www.proqol.org or www.compassionfatigue.org

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FOCUS ON YOUR EMPATHY

Your empathy for others helps you do your job. It is important to take good care of your feelings and thoughts by monitoring how you use them. The most resilient workers are those that know how to turn their feelings to work mode when they go on duty, but off-work mode when they go off duty. This is not denial; it is a coping strategy. It is a way they get maximum protection while working (Feelings switched to work mode) and maximum support while resting (feelings switched off-work mode).

How to become better at switching between Work and Off-Work Modes

1. Make this a conscious process. Talk to yourself as you switch.
2. Use images that make you feel safe and protected (work-mode) or connected and cared for (non-work mode) to help you switch.
3. Develop rituals that help you switch as you start and stop work.
4. Breathe slowly and deeply to calm yourself when starting a tough job.

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Resources:

7 Ways to Boost Confidence and Morale in Uncertain Times

<https://www.inc.com/gordon-tredgold/7-ways-successful-leaders-deal-with-chaos-and-uncertainty.html>

APHSA May 2020 Navigating the Storm (Webinar Recording)

<https://vimeo.com/416947095/9229922ca2>

COMPASSION SATISFACTION AND COMPASSION FATIGUE questionnaire:

https://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English_Self-Score.pdf

Emergency Responders: Tips for taking care of yourself

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>

Professional Quality of Life questionnaire

https://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English.pdf

Six Daily Questions to Ask Yourself in Quarantine

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_daily_questions_to_ask_yourself_in_quarantine#When:12:43:00Z

Stress Management for Emergency Responders Understanding Responder Stress

<https://www2c.cdc.gov/podcasts/media/pdf/AntaresPgm1.pdf>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). *Trauma*. From SAMHSA/HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions:

<https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma-informed>

The Art of Self-Care for Social Workers (NASW)

<http://www.socialworkblog.org/practice-and-professional-development/2020/04/the-art-of-self-care-for-social-workers/>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: Stress First Aid Self Care / Organizational Support Mode

https://istss.org/ISTSS_Main/media/Documents/Stress-First-Aid-Self-Care-Organizational-NCPTSD101.pdf

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