

# Chapter 14

## Self-Care

*“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”*  
~William James, *Psychologist and Philosopher*

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### OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

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- Recognize the signs of and how to reduce stress
  - Understand the concept of vicarious trauma in victim advocacy
  - Learn (or re-learn) the importance of self-care
  - Learn new self-care methods for yourself and for callers
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*The information in this chapter has been copied or adapted from Lark 1995 and Block 2008.*

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### HOW STRESS AND ANXIETY AFFECT THE BODY<sup>1</sup>

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Your emotional and physical reactions to stress are partly determined by the sensitivity of your Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). This system produces the fight, flight or freeze reaction in response to stress and excitement, speeding up and heightening the pulse rate, respiration, muscle tension, glandular function, and circulation of the blood. If you have recurrent anxiety symptoms, either major or minor lifestyle and emotional upsets may cause an overreaction of your SNS. If you have an especially stressful life, your SNS may always be poised to react to a crisis, putting you in a state of constant tension. In this mode, you tend to react to small stresses the same way you would react to real emergencies. The energy that accumulates in the body to meet this “emergency” must be discharged in order to bring your body back into balance. Repeated episodes of the fight, flight or freeze reaction depletes your energy reserves and, if they continue, cause a downward spiral that can lead to emotional burnout and eventually complete exhaustion. You can break this spiral by learning to manage stress in a way that protects and even increases your energy level.

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<sup>1</sup> Lark, Susan M. *The Menopause Self-Help Book*. California: Celestial Arts Berkeley, 1995. Print.

People with increased levels of anxiety and nervous tension can learn to develop more effective ways of dealing with day-to-day stressors. These stressors include minor, everyday pressures that people with a healthy emotional balance handle easily, but that can be overwhelming for people whose anxiety responses are easily triggered.

These experiences can evoke anxiety, fear, or other feelings of being upset. Moreover, significant lifestyle changes, such as the death of a loved one; divorce; job loss; financial problems, and major changes in personal relationships can seem impossible to handle when a person is already feeling anxious and tense. Being unable to cope with stress effectively can also damage a person's self-esteem and self-confidence. A person with anxiety episodes may feel a decreasing sense of self-worth as their ability to handle the usual range of activities diminishes. Life stressors do not necessarily change, so how a person copes with them can really make a difference.

### **TRAUMATIC STRESS AND COMPASSION FATIGUE<sup>2</sup>**

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There is a cost to caring. Professionals who listen to the stories of fear, pain and suffering of others may feel similar fear, pain and suffering because they care. Professionals who are especially vulnerable to *traumatic stress and compassion fatigue* (TS/CF) include emergency care workers, counselors, mental health professionals, medical professionals, clergy, *advocate volunteers*, victim service providers, and human service workers. If you ever feel as though you are losing your sense of self to the clients you serve - you may be suffering from TS/CF.

TS/CF is NOT "burnout." Burnout is associated with stress and hassles involved in your work; it is cumulative and relatively predictable. Frequently, a vacation or change of job addresses burnout. TS/CF is very different. TS/CF is a state of tension and preoccupation with the individual or cumulative trauma of clients as manifested in one or more ways: (1) intrusive thoughts about a client's assault, (2) avoidance/numbing of reminders of the event, and (3) persistent arousal. With TS/CF, you absorb the trauma through the eyes and ears of your clients. It can be thought of as secondary post-traumatic stress.

There are ways to reduce the effects of compassion fatigue and replenish your "compassion capacitor." The rest of this chapter consists of self-care ideas to get you started. The best strategy begins with your own understanding of yourself. Your self-care strategy is as unique as you are; your own tastes, personality and interests all must be taken into consideration. Whatever you do - make it positive!

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<sup>2</sup> Block, J. "What is Compassion Fatigue?" Avenidas.com. 27 August 2008. Web. 17 December 2010.  
<<http://www.avenidas.org/assets/pdf/Fatigue.pdf>>

## TECHNIQUES FOR RELAXATION<sup>3</sup>

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Many clients ask about techniques for coping more effectively with stress. Although some people's stress levels require a referral for counseling or psychotherapy when symptoms are severe, most people are looking for practical ways to manage stress on their own. They want to take responsibility for handling their own problems by observing their current (and past) methods of dealing with stress, learning new techniques to improve their habits, and practicing these techniques on a regular basis.

The exercises will teach you the following helpful techniques: (1) quieting the mind and body; (2) grounding techniques (how to feel more centered), and (3) releasing muscle tension. These techniques will help make coping with stress more effective, make thoughts calmer and more peaceful, and help with relaxation. Decide which ones produce the greatest benefits for you and that you can do on a regular basis.

### Quieting the Mind and Body

People with recurring symptoms of anxiety and nervous tension are usually barraged by a constant stream of negative "self-talk." Throughout the day, your conscious mind may be inundated with thoughts, feelings, and fantasies that trigger feelings of being upset. Many of these thoughts replay unresolved issues of health, finances, or personal and work relationships. This relentless mental replay of unresolved issues can reinforce the anxiety symptoms and be exhausting. It is important to know how to shut off the constant inner dialogue and quiet the mind.

The first two exercises require you to sit quietly and engage in a simple, repetitive activity. By emptying your mind, you give yourself rest. Meditation allows you to create a state of deep relaxation, which is very healing to the entire body. During meditation, your heart rate, blood pressure and metabolism slow, and muscle tension is released. Brain wave patterns shift from the fast beta waves that occur during a normal active day to the slower alpha waves, which appear just before falling asleep or in times of deep relaxation.

#### Exercise 1: Focusing

Select a small personal object that you like. It might be a jeweled pin or a simple flower from your garden. Focus all your attention on this object as you inhale and exhale slowly and deeply for one to two minutes. While you are doing this exercise, notice if other thoughts or feelings enter your mind. If they do, gently return your attention to the object. At the end of this exercise, you may feel more peaceful and calm.

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<sup>3</sup> Lark, Susan M. *The Menopause Self-Help Book*. California: Celestial Arts Berkeley, 1995. Print.

### **Exercise 2: Meditation**

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Let your breathing be slow and relaxed. Focus all your attention on your breathing. Notice the in-and-out movement of your chest and abdomen. Block out all other thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If you feel your attention wandering, gently bring it back to your breathing.

As you inhale, say the word “peace” to yourself, and as you exhale, say the word “calm.” Draw out the pronunciation of the word so that it lasts for the entire breath. The word “peace” sounds like p-e-e-e-a-a-c-e. The word “calm” sounds like: c-a-a-l-l-l-l-m-m. Repeating these words as you breathe may help you concentrate.

### **Grounding Techniques**

Many people suffering from stress often feel ungrounded and disorganized. The next exercise teaches you a grounding technique that may help you feel more centered and focused. This exercise will allow you to organize your energy and proceed more effectively with your daily routine.

### **Exercise 3: Oak Tree Meditation**

Sit in a comfortable position with your arms resting at your sides. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Let your breathing be slow and relaxed.

See your body as a strong oak tree. Your body is solid like the wide, brown trunk of the tree. Imagine sturdy roots growing from your legs and going down deeply into the earth, anchoring your body. You feel solid and strong, able to handle any stress.

When upsetting thoughts or situations occur, visualize your body remaining grounded like the oak tree. Feel the strength and stability in your arms and legs. You feel confident and relaxed, able to handle any situation.

### **Releasing Muscle Tension**

The next exercise will help you get in touch with your areas of muscle tension and then help you learn to release this tension. People hold their tension in different places, such as the neck, chest, face, jaw or back. Contracted muscles limit movement and energy flow in the body since they tend to have decreased blood circulation and oxygenation, and accumulate an excess of waste products, such as carbon dioxide and lactic acid. Therefore, muscle tension can be a significant cause of the fatigue. The following exercise helps release tension and blocked emotions held in tight muscles.

**Exercise 4: Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Lie on your back in a comfortable position. Allow your arms to rest at your sides with your palms down. Inhale and exhale slowly and deeply. Clench your hands into fists and hold them tightly for 15 seconds. As you do this, relax the rest of your body. Visualize your fists contracting, becoming tighter and tighter. Then let your hands relax. On relaxing, see a golden light flowing into the entire body, making all your muscles soft and pliable.

Now, tense and relax the following parts of your body in this order: face, shoulders, back, stomach, pelvis, legs, feet, and toes. Hold each part tensed for 15 seconds and then relax your body for 30 seconds before going on to the next part. Finish the exercise by shaking your hands and imagining the remaining tension flowing out of your fingertips.

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**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

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- Relaxation techniques help people feel grounded and reduce or eliminate many of the physiological symptoms of stress
- Breathing and simple stretches are effective techniques that you can lead a distressed caller through
- Being good to yourself is NOT a selfish act - it is a necessary one

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**FOR FURTHER READING**

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Hendricks, Gay. *Conscious Breathing: Breathwork for Health, Stress Release, and Personal Mastery*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995. Print.

*Perfect Calm Deck: 50 Exercises to Soothe Mind and Body*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2002. Print.

Overman, Paul. *Ten Minutes to Relax*. New York: Simon and Schuster Audio, 2003. Audiobook.

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