



City of Westminster



Self-care for frontline workers toolkit

Updated April 2021

Supporting rough sleepers can be a slow process with subtle rewards. At times it can be frustrating, maybe due to lack of progress, difficulty engaging or refusal to engage – placing emotional strain on staff working with clients.

The aims of this toolkit are:

- Describe how a client's behaviour can impact staff members.
- Provide information about compassion fatigue so staff can recognise it.
- Describe how burn-out can affect both the client and staff member.
- Provide a list self-care methods examples that could be used to reduce burn-out.

Client's behaviour and the impact on you

It is important to **acknowledge that the behaviour of clients can have an impact on how we feel as individuals.** This is known as transference, which is the redirection of emotions towards another and the countertransference response which is the emotional reaction from yourself. Basically, you will take on a bit of how the client feels and will probably respond emotionally. Table 1 (*page 2*) describes different behaviours and how they could impact you.

Table 1: Examples of client behaviour and the potential impact on staff

Client behaviour	Potential impact on you
Lack of insight	Feeling frustrated
Poor boundaries	Overwhelming, draining, intrusive
Abusive or aggressive behaviour	Loss of empathy, anger, threatened, fragile
Slow progress	You can feel that you're not making a difference, loss of meaning/ purpose, hopelessness feeling incompetent at job, powerless
Poor engagement with support services	You could feel passive, lack of initiation, loss of empathy, impatience, frustration
If situation raises safeguarding concerns	Anxiety and panic

AVC Coping skill: if someone is shouting at you = acknowledge, validate their emotions, and contain the emotion. For example: “It’s understandable you feel that way because...” Try your best not to react to the emotion being directed at you and respond in a way that contains the emotion.

Compassion fatigue and how it can affect you

All members of staff are at risk of compassion fatigue and burnout. [Recognising the signs](#) and learning ways to manage the symptoms is the first step toward healing.



Compassion fatigue/ burnout may impact you in the following ways:

- Excessive blaming, anger, boredom, cynicism
- Bottled up emotions
- Isolation from others
- Physical reactions such as exhaustion, headaches, physical illness (heart disease, high blood pressure, sleep disturbance).
- Changes in emotional tolerance and disruptions in self-soothing capacities.
- Changes in thinking (negativity).
- Sense of meaning, identity, worldview and beliefs about self and others.
- Loss of sense of identity on the job.
- Existential / spiritual impact.
- Depersonalisation – showing up physically but not really there.
- Block out difficult feelings.

- Risk of substance use, shopping addictions or other negative coping to block out difficult feelings.
- In denial about symptoms

Impact of burn out on professional relationship

It's important we reflect on the impact of burnout on the professional relationship. Over-identification or avoidance in the relationship can occur, [both with an impact on the client and staff member.](#)

Have a look at the examples of over-identification and avoidance in table 2 and see if you can identify with any of these?

Table 2: Examples of over-identification and avoidance

Over-identification	Avoidance
Over-involvement	Shutting down - detachment and difficulty empathising
Blurring off boundaries – doing too much, feeling it's never enough	Disbelief/ minimisation (it can't be that bad)
Uncertainty – loss of confidence in own decision making – swayed by pressure from others	Forgetting appointments or important details, not taking calls
May identify with the client and internalise their pain	Avoiding exploration (shutting client down)
Emotional distress – intruding into personal life, sleep disruption	Judgemental, accusing

Over-identification	Avoidance
Reciprocal dependency (rely on feedback from client to feel worthy/worthwhile and allow lots of contact and do more than should)	Labelling of client ('trouble maker', 'manipulator' 'drama queen')
Thinking about the client outside of work	Misunderstanding client
If we do too much for clients it could make them too reliant on us and they don't learn how to do tasks independently	If block off and avoid feelings, client may feel that you are insensitive or don't believe them and they will shut down as well



Exercise

This could be done at team meeting / away day or at any other time you wish to explore a situation of working with a client that you are struggling with.

Consider a case that you found emotionally challenging and which affected you in some way

What was it about the client/ situation that affected you?
 How did it affect you?
 What did you do or what are you doing now to try and deal with this?

Self-care methods

There are numerous methods you can use to kick start your self-care and reduce your stress levels. A lot of suggestions are included below, but please note this list is not exhaustive! Take time to reflect on your own self and wellbeing – practice becoming self-aware of your body and anxiety/stress indicators. Start with assessing your level of self-care by filling out the following questionnaire:



http://aceresponse.org/img/uploads/file/self_care_questionnaire.pdf

Remember: If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed or stressed, talk to a colleague or your line manager.



Consider your ABC (awareness, balance and connection) of Self-care

Awareness (stress signs, of own limitations, needs, resources, vulnerabilities). Peace and quiet is needed to bring awareness to what is going on inside.

Balance (work, play, and rest). This balance guides decisions about embracing or relinquishing certain activities, behaviors, or attitudes. Make equal time for work, play and rest.

Connection (to self and others). Healthy self-care does not take place solely within oneself. It involves being connected in meaningful ways with others and to something larger.

- **Pay attention to your body** – exercise, eat well, go for a massage every so often, take part in therapies, attend yoga classes, practice mindfulness (<https://www.bemindfulonline.com/>) or meditation.
- **Ensure you have a balanced and realistic workload** of types and number of cases. If you feel overwhelmed due the level of work, speak to your manager.
- **Ensure you do some rewarding work**, with a chance of success.
- **Maintain divisions and boundaries** (between work and home). When you get home change out of work clothes, don't work from home unless absolutely necessary, avoid working in your bedroom and avoid working on your days off.

- **Express how you are feeling** - talk to staff at work, about how you are feeling – this will provide a sense of validation and support.
- **Ensure you receive regular supervision and training.** <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses> provides free online training.
- **Take proper holidays** – make sure you turn off your work e-mails if they are connected to your phone, turn off you work mobile and unwind.
- **Ensure you take breaks** during the work day.
- **Organise your time to help you complete tasks.** If you struggle with organising your time have a read of some tips <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Time-management-tips.aspx>
- **Take time to reflect on your own self and wellbeing** – practice becoming self-aware of your body and anxiety/stress indicators. One exercise that can help to become more aware of your body is the body scan: <https://www.livingwell.org.au/mindfulness-exercises-3/6-body-scan/>
- **Practice breathing techniques:** <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/how-breathing-affects-feelings/>
- **Challenge your thinking** if your thoughts are causing you harm/ anxiety: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/cbt-thought-record/>

Colour breathing exercises

We can also visualise ourselves breathing in the desired colour associated with a positive or helpful feeling, and breathing out the colour associated with the negative feeling.

DEPRESSION: **Breathe in orange** (positive energy), breathe out **blue** / black

ANXIETY: **Breathe in blue** (calming), breathe out **red**.

ANGER: **Breathe in blue** (calming) or **green** (balance), breathe out **red**.

- Be more **compassionate to yourself** if you suffer from self-criticism or are critical of others (as this is a reflection of your inner world):
<https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/what-is-compassion-focused-therapy-cft/>. Practice exercises to increase self-compassion: <http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>
<http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>
- Find ways to contain and manage reactions (humour, creativity, self-expression e.g. writing, art, dance).
- Seek positive experiences – take time to soothe, heal, rest and play.
- Spend time in nature – visit a local park.

Self-Care when dealing with challenging clients

- Pay attention to intrusive thoughts, anxiety / symptoms, poor sleep and don't avoid or dismiss these behaviours or feelings.
- Use breathing and mindfulness techniques – use visualisations and other positive imagery e.g. safe place imagery:
<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/SafePlace.pdf>
- Imagining a shield or barrier, between yourself and a challenging client can help to provide a protective boundary, so you don't absorb on strong emotions from your client.
- Writing notes can help you to process and set aside worry and feel that you are doing something positive to help your client BUT allow yourself distance and time if/when necessary.
- Notice if you are frequently bringing work home, looking at e-mails etc. so that you are maintaining a separation between work and other aspects of your life.
- Pay attention to concerns raised by loved ones.
- Seek support and or personal therapy if problem patterns and reactions persist. Your employer may have an employee support service, which can provide a small number of counselling sessions if needed. Alternatively, you can see whether there is an IAPT service in your area: [http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Psychological%20therapies%20\(IAPT\)/LocationSearch/10008](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Psychological%20therapies%20(IAPT)/LocationSearch/10008)

