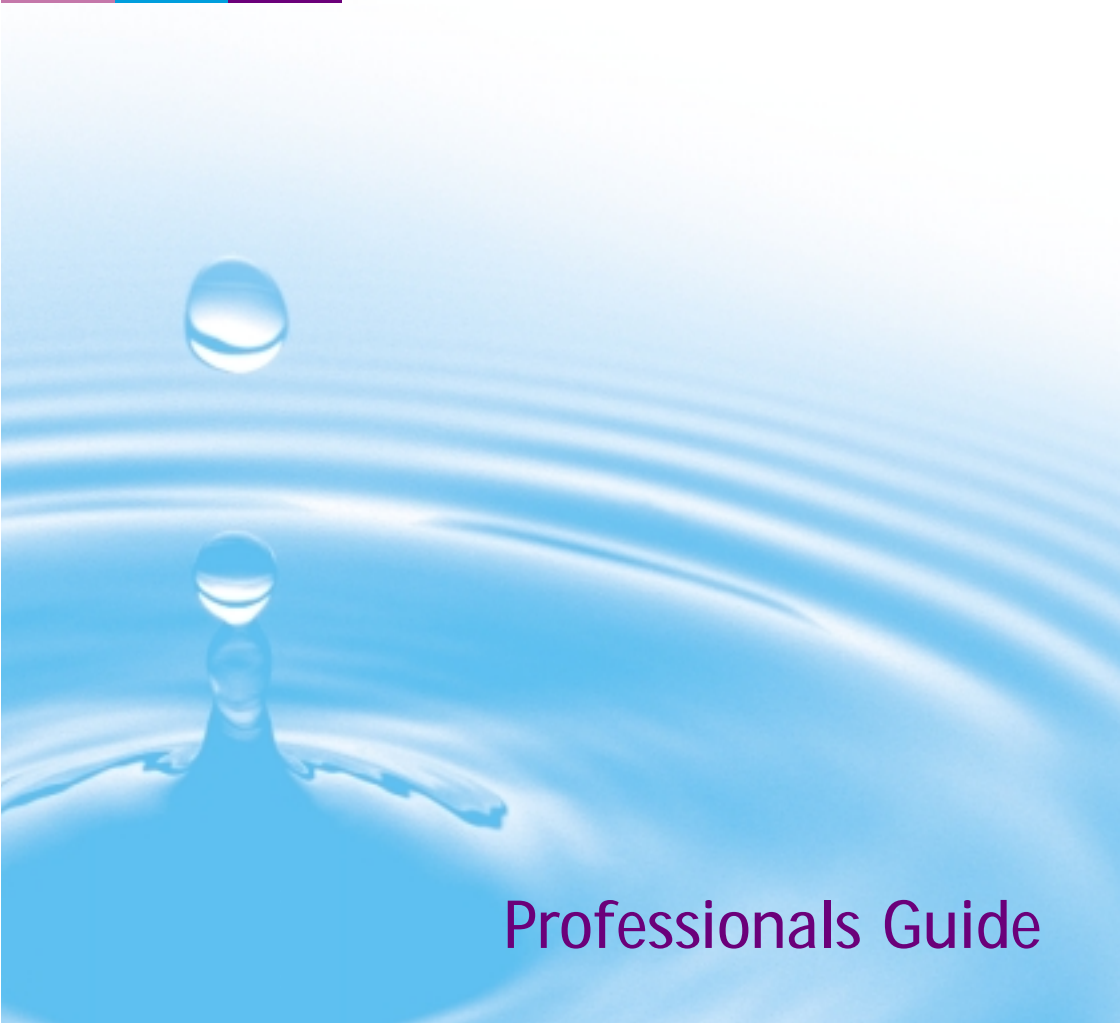


Self care for workers supporting the traumatically bereaved




Professionals Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

The ROYAL
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Victims Unit: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister



Traumatic bereavement is a difficult field to work in. The assistance you give to those in need will take a toll and be felt in your own life. Personal factors will make you more sensitive or resilient to stress at different times. Similarly, coping methods that worked for you in the past become more or less important over time; some will remain favourites while others become out-of-touch with your needs. Self-care is an on-going effort to keep challenges balanced against the ability to cope. Some useful steps in examining your level of self-care are listed below:

1. Preparation

Identify your personal warning signs – thoughts, feelings, actions, and bodily signals that you are stressed or becoming stressed.

Examples:

- build-up of negative thoughts or images (about yourself, other people, other groups, relationships, or the future);
- difficulties in concentration and memory (accident prone or forgetful);
- becoming irritable, emotionally numb, or finding your emotions difficult to control;
- feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, safety fears, or guilt;
- self-medicating, smoking, drinking, or using drugs;
- changes to sleep pattern, appetite, or level of energy;
- increased heart rate and breathing, tension in the shoulders or neck, flushed cheeks/face, headache, tiredness etc.

These warning signs often occur in response to triggers such as finances, accidents/errors, criticism, family members or relationships, tiredness, alcohol, etc.

2. Skills

Plan ahead – some things that you see, hear, or feel trigger your body's stress response. It is important to know what these triggers are and how to take control of them. Planning will involve the following two steps:

- Prepare yourself for people or situations which are likely to trigger your stress response (e.g. evaluations, staff meetings, media involvement). These can be either day-to-day occurrences or one-off stressful situations.
- Decide what to do when you feel your mind and body becoming

stressed. You will need to redirect your thoughts as well as your physical stress. Practice the method(s) you choose.

Avoidance – where possible, avoid or reduce your participation in situations which repeatedly distress you. Some of these can be put aside until you feel better able to deal with them. Even a short break from them can prevent stress build-up from snowballing into other areas of your life.


Balance – keep variety in your workload and say no (when appropriate) to work that would put you at unnecessary risk. Do not be afraid to discuss temporary changes to your workload with your supervisor. The aim is not to permanently avoid stress but to manage your exposure so that you remain effective. Everyone will have their own level of ideal stress, so it is important that you find out what works for you. Strike the right balance and you need not rely on will power or coping mechanisms to get you through the day.

Relaxation – identify at least one method of relaxation that works well for you and use it regularly or when appropriate. This could be a formal relaxation technique (deep breathing, guided imagery, PMR), a soothing activity (taking a bath, listening to music), or a relaxing pastime (writing, reading, spending time with close friends). Exercise is also highly recommended as a healthy method of relaxation and stress reduction (e.g. walking, jogging, swimming, sports, fitness or weights training, etc.).

People relax in different ways so it is important you spend time finding out what works for you as an individual. Make time in your routine for relaxation (if you haven't already) and take extra time for relaxation when you feel your personal warning signs for stress build up.

Distraction – recognise the difference between complaining that relieves stress and complaining that serves as a reminder. Use distraction to interrupt unwanted repetitive or intrusive thoughts, images, and impulses such as these. They will be unable to play out in your head if you are thinking about something else.

To use distraction, choose a useful or helpful activity (or thought) that you would like to do to take your mind off negative thoughts or images. At the very least your method of distraction should be something



incompatible with the original stress-causing thoughts. Some ways of thought-stopping and distraction will be more suited to you than others so it is important to be creative and individual. Once you have found ways of distracting yourself, you must practice these until they are automatic.

3. Guidelines

Be realistic about your own role – remind yourself that you can only do what you can only do. To reduce feelings of helplessness, identify elements of day to day life where you do have control and exercise this.

Use support networks – make use of your own network of social and peer support both in work and at home. Give support to peers and learn to accept it in return. Ask other people how they cope with similar problems. Spend time with friends who don't work in the fields of trauma or bereavement.

Take time out – find a place where you can take time out and use it on a regular basis. This can be a place for you to be alone, or to talk with other people about non-work-related topics.

Stay positive – reward yourself for the important work you do. On the way home, focus on a good thing that happened during the day.

Variety – remember that you have physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs. Develop varied interests and supports as appropriate to these. Use training and development opportunities.

Counselling – use employee counselling services if available. They are a good source of advice and expertise.

Take a flexible approach – your tolerance for stress will vary over time so be flexible in how you approach your workload. Men and women are likely to have different triggers and coping methods. If something doesn't work, try again or try something new!

The costs and rewards of working with trauma are inescapable, but they will never exceed the value of your own life or the need to remain effective.

If specific difficulties such as sleep disturbance or intrusive thoughts develop, refer to the other guidelines on these issues in the series.

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What else?

There may be a need, from time to time, for specific help to manage or control certain excessive intrusions or distress. These are best discussed with your GP, health worker, or social services representative, who will be able to consider your options and information available to you. Referral to bereavement/trauma groups and voluntary agencies can also be arranged through these sources.

Professionals guide

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Ages 0-5

Traumatic grief in middle childhood
Ages 5-10

Traumatic grief in adolescence
Ages 10-18

Traumatic grief in adults

Traumatic grief
Anger management

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Guidelines for the immediate response
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The Coroner

Schools Guide

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Ages 0-5

Traumatic grief in middle childhood
Ages 5-10

Traumatic grief in adolescence
Ages 10-18

Sudden death
Information for pupils

Individual booklets are available from your local health centre, library or school
The full series can be downloaded from www.royalhospitals.org/traumaticgrief