



**Caregivers on the Front Lines:
Helping Yourself as You Help Others**

Table of Contents

Burnout/Work-Life Balance

- Combating Compassion Fatigue
- Addressing Moral Distress and Stress
- Resilience in Stressful Times
- Identifying and Coping With Job-related Stress
- Tips for Coping With Stress
- What is post-traumatic stress disorder?
- How well do you cope with stress?

Combating Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is common among caregivers who spend a significant amount of time working with the seriously ill and traumatized. Compassion fatigue shares many of the same symptoms with burnout, another common issue among caregivers, but burnout, generally indicates a loss of the ability to empathize. Victims of compassion fatigue are overwhelmed by their emotional connection with and compassion for those they aid, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Long-term, untreated compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and other serious stress-related conditions. That's why it's important to recognize, address and treat the causes and symptoms immediately by taking care of your physical and emotional health.

Who is at risk?

Physicians, caregivers and volunteers who help others often are extremely empathic people, and their generous and caring nature may heighten their vulnerability to compassion fatigue. People may be especially vulnerable if they have experienced unresolved trauma in their own lives or are going through an emotional or traumatic event at the same time as the people they are treating.

Compassion fatigue can happen slowly over time, or it can come on suddenly, the U.S. Department of Defense advises on its Military OneSource site for service members, veterans and their families. The signs are similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder but can vary greatly among individuals:

Nervousness and anxiety: You may feel fearful about going out or be hyper-vigilant about your own and your family's safety.

Anger and irritability: You may argue with relatives, friends or co-workers or feel angry for no discernable reason.

Mood swings: Compassion fatigue can make it difficult for you to control your emotions. You may feel fine one minute and then find yourself suddenly crying or feeling very anxious the next.

Difficulty concentrating: Maintaining focus or making even simple decisions may be signs of compassion fatigue. You may forget parts of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.

Changes in appetite, sleep or other habits: You may be eating more or less than usual, or may be sleeping too much or not enough. You also may withdraw from others by becoming emotionally distant and detached.

Physical changes: People suffering from compassion fatigue may experience headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, heart palpitations or shortness of breath. You may notice flu-like or cold symptoms. (If you do have any of these physical changes, see your health care provider to rule out a medical ailment.)

Depression: Feeling sadness and grief, lowered self-esteem or a loss of interest in ordinary activities, memory difficulties, extreme fatigue or frequent crying episodes also are possible signs of compassion fatigue.

Other symptoms cited by mental health professionals include:

- Isolation from others
- Complaints from co-workers or supervisors about work performance
- Substance abuse
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling and sexual addictions
- Poor self-care, including lack of hygiene and unkempt appearance
- Legal problems or indebtedness
- Nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic events
- Difficulty separating work from personal life
- Lack of connection with co-workers and others on the job

Addressing Compassion Fatigue

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, which works to educate healthcare professionals about the issue, such symptoms are normal displays of stress resulting from the work of caregiving. The good news is that, “While the symptoms are often disruptive, depressive, and irritating, an awareness of the symptoms and their negative effect on your life can lead to positive change, personal transformation, and a new resiliency,” the project suggests on its website.

Here are some tips from the project to address compassion fatigue:

- Be kind to yourself.
- Be aware of what you’re experiencing and educate yourself.
- Accept where you are on your path at all times.
- Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate what you’re experiencing.
- Listen to others who are suffering.
- Clarify your personal boundaries: What works for you; what doesn’t.
- Express your needs verbally.
- Take positive action to change your environment.

Untreated compassion fatigue can impair your health as well as your work performance. It also can negatively impact your personal and family life. That’s why it’s important to get help promptly if you feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities. Be aware that help is available for the helper and that you are as important as the people you are helping. Some additional tips from the Military OneSource website:

Talk with someone you trust: Just voicing your feelings and fears can help you feel more in control and less alone. A supervisor, mentor or trusted colleague can remind you of what’s typical and can help you anticipate challenges that may lie ahead.

Take care of yourself: Eat well-balanced meals, get enough sleep and make time to exercise, even if you only take a few minutes for a short walk. Practice deep breathing and other relaxation techniques. Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to help you manage your emotions.

Give yourself time: Compassion fatigue isn’t a sign of weakness. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient with you. Telling people how they can help will make you feel useful and help you get the support you need.

Know your own limits: You may need to stop or change your assignment, even if it’s only temporarily. You can’t be effective if you’re exhausted or know you can’t help. Take time for a well-deserved break. When you return, you may be better able to help others because you have a refreshed attitude, more energy and a different perspective.

Focus on the good you are doing: You are giving the gift of yourself and your experience and training.

If you ever feel overwhelmed, talk with a professional who can suggest ways to help others without neglecting your own needs. Your Employee Assistance Program can aid you in finding the counselling and other resources you need to get back to feeling yourself again.

Unrecognized and untreated compassion fatigue causes people to leave their profession, fall into the throws of addictions or in extreme cases become self-destructive or suicidal, warns Angelea Panos, a therapist and board member of Gift From Within, a nonprofit organization for survivors of trauma and victimization. “It is important that we all understand this phenomenon for our own well-being, but also for our colleagues,” she writes on the Gift From Within website. “If you notice a colleague in distress, reach out to them... and let them know you care and are available to talk if they need.”

Resources

- Gift From Within: www.giftfromwithin.org
- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: www.compassionfatigue.org
- Military OneSource: www.militaryonesource.mil
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Addressing Moral Distress and Stress

When we feel pressure at work to act in ways that conflict with our personal or professional values, the result can be moral distress. This distress is especially prevalent in health care, where life-and-death decisions, ethical dilemmas and highly charged interactions are the norm rather than the exception. It's important for clinicians, especially those in emergency and critical care, to be aware of the sources of moral distress and its effects, and to arm themselves with strategies to prevent such situations from threatening their health and their careers.

Sources of Moral Distress

Research identifies several common sources of moral distress, according to the Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, including:

- Continued life support that's not in the patient's best interest
- Inadequate communication about end-of-life care between providers and patients and families
- Inappropriate use of health care resources
- Inadequate staffing or staff not adequately trained to provide care
- Inadequate pain relief for patients
- False hope given to patients and families

Dangers of Moral Distress

Moral distress is regularly identified as a major stressor for health care professionals who may feel powerless to speak up about ethical conflicts, let alone take action to resolve them. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) warns that allowing such conflicts to continue unaddressed can have dire effects on nurses' health and well-being, their professional development and advancement, and the practice of health care in general.

In the workplace, moral distress can mean:

- Poor communication
- Lack of trust
- High turnover rates
- Defensiveness and lack of collaboration across disciplines.

For caregivers, the results can be:

- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Frustration, anger and burnout
- Feeling belittled, unimportant, and even isolated because others don't appear to recognize the same ethical conflicts
- Avoidance of patient contact
- Loss of empathy
- Poor performance reviews
- Leaving the profession entirely.

Taking on Moral Distress

The AACN offers a toolkit (www.aacn.org/wd/practice/docs/4as_to_rise_above_moral_distress.pdf) called the 4As to Rise Above Moral Distress, the kit offers clear steps—**ASK, AFFIRM, ASSESS, ACT**—for addressing the issue.

ASK: You may be unaware of the exact nature of the problem but are feeling distress. The goal of this stage is to clarify whether moral distress is present and, if so, identify the cause.

AFFIRM: Affirm your distress and professional obligation to act. Validate your feelings and perceptions with others then commit to taking action.

ASSESS: Identify the sources and the severity of the distress. Determine whether you are ready to act and, if so, form a plan of action.

ACT: Prepare personally and professionally to take action, whether individually or through a committee, nursing council or similar body. Implement strategies to initiate the needed changes. Anticipate and manage setbacks. Maintain the improvements.

Further Strategies

The following chart from the Online Journal of Issues in Nursing offers a synopsis of other strategies identified by nurse educators for reducing moral distress.

Strategy	Implementation
Speak up	Identify the problem, gather the facts and voice your opinion.
Be deliberate	Know who you need to speak with and know what you need to speak about.
Be accountable	Sometimes our actions are not quite right. Be ready to accept the consequences, should things not turn out the way you had planned.
Build support networks	Find colleagues who support you or who support acting to address moral distress. Speak with one authoritative voice.
Focus on changes in the work environment	Focusing on the work environment will be more productive than focusing on an individual patient. Remember, similar problems tend to occur over and over. It's not usually the patient, but the system, that needs changing.
Participate in moral distress education	Attend forums and discussions about moral distress. Learn all you can about it.
Make it interdisciplinary	Many causes of moral distress are interdisciplinary. Nursing alone cannot change the work environment. Multiple views and collaboration are needed to improve a system, especially a complex one such as a hospital unit.
Find root causes	What are the common causes of moral distress in your unit? Target those.
Develop policies	Develop policies to encourage open discussion, interdisciplinary collaboration and the initiation of ethics consultations.
Design a workshop	Train nursing staff to recognize moral distress, identify barriers to change and create a plan for action.

Adapted by Elizabeth G. Epstein, PhD, RN, and Sarah Delgado, MSN, RN ACNP-BC, from: Hamric, A. B., Davis, W. S., & Childress, M. D. (2006). Moral distress in health care professionals. Pharos, 69(1), 16-23.; Epstein, E. G., & Hamric, A. B. (2009). Moral distress, moral residue, and the crescendo effect. Journal of Clinical Ethics, 20(4), 330-342.

Your Employee Assistance Program Can Help

Nursing leaders warn that some moral distress is probably inevitable in the health care workplace. That doesn't make dealing with the conflict, stress and anxiety any easier. Your Employee Assistance Program can help. Call today to talk with our credentialed, caring clinicians about your personal concerns. They can work with you over the phone or refer you to a counselor or other resources in your community for further help. The service is completely confidential and available anytime, 24 hours a day, seven days a week to you and your household members.

Resource

- Epstein, E.G., Delgado, S., (Sept 30, 2010) "Understanding and Addressing Moral Distress" OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing Vol. 15, No. 3, Manuscript 1. American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (www.aacn.org)

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Resilience in Stressful Times

Keep in mind that stress doesn't always get better on its own. You may have to actively work on it, especially if the stress you have been facing is prolonged or intense. The following stress management techniques may help:

- **Scale back:** While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can cut back on or delegate to someone else. If news reports or social media posts are contributing to your stress, try turning off the TV and the Internet until you feel better able to deal.
- **Prepare:** If you are feeling edgy already, try to stay ahead of additional stress by preparing for meetings or trips, scheduling your time better, and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. Stress mounts when you run short on time, so build a cushion into your schedule for traffic jams or slow public transportation, for example.
- **Reach out:** Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, or clergy and spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being and your ability to cope. Volunteer in your community.
- **Take up a hobby:** It may seem cliché, but an enjoyable pastime can calm your racing mind and heart rate. Try reading, gardening, crafts, tinkering with electronics, fishing, carpentry or music—things that you don't get competitive or more stressed out about.
- **Relax:** Physical activity, meditation, yoga, massage and other relaxation techniques can help you manage stress. It doesn't matter which technique you choose. What matters is refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body.
- **Get enough sleep:** Lack of sleep affects your immune system and your judgment and makes you more likely to snap over minor irritations. Most people need seven to eight hours a day.
- **Avoid alcohol and caffeine:** While momentarily calming, both can contribute to stress and anxiety.
- **Get professional help:** If your stress management efforts aren't helpful enough, see your doctor or contact your Employee Assistance Program. Chronic, uncontrolled stress can lead to a variety of potentially serious health problems, including depression and pain.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Identifying and Coping With Job-related Stress

If you, your co-workers or employees seem to be more hurried, strained, tense or nervous than in the past, there is a good chance the cause of the anxiety is work-related stress. A recent study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) states that 40 percent of workers thought their job was “extremely” or “very” stressful. In addition, 25 percent of respondents felt their job was the No. 1 source of stress in their lives and that they felt “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work.” Stress causes a variety of physical and emotional changes in people. Managers (and employees) should be trained to recognize the common signs of stress and burnout in other people. If you are aware and conscious of these signs you can implement specific changes in day-to-day activities to minimize (or even eliminate) job-related stress from your workplace.

Causes of Work-related Stress

A conflict with a supervisor... feeling overwhelmed with tasks and responsibilities... a noisy air conditioning unit... a longer-than-normal commute... There are number of things, from seemingly minor to undeniably large, that can cause a person to feel stressed-out in the workplace.

Causes of stress will vary from person to person and not everyone will feel anxiety from the same stressors (causes of stress). For example, some people thrive in work environments where they have to meet fast-approaching deadlines each day, such as in the news industry. Other people would find working under these conditions to be extremely stressful.

Sources of work-related stress commonly cited by employees include:

- Long or difficult commutes to work
- Disagreements with co-workers or supervisors
- Having disagreeable or difficult co-workers
- Experiencing verbal abuse
- Feeling overworked
- Feeling unappreciated
- Having difficult deadlines to meet
- Feeling underpaid
- Job insecurity
- Having to take work home to complete
- Diminished benefits
- Feeling tasks are monotonous, repetitive or redundant
- Working long hours
- Fear of physical violence in the workplace

Signs of Stress

Stress can manifest itself in a multitude of different physical or emotional changes in a person.

Physical signs of stress include:

- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- Back and muscle pain
- Grinding teeth
- Feeling lightheaded
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- Rashes, itching and hives
- Weight gain or loss
- A weakened immune system
- Increase in drinking, smoking or drug use (making it harder for the body to fight viruses and bacteria)

Emotional signs of stress include:

- Forgetfulness
- Excessive nervousness, anxiety and worry
- Increased anger and hostility
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Difficulty communicating
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Withdrawal from social interaction

Ways to Manage or Eliminate Stress

If you feel minor stress from your job or you are getting reflux from the constant strain, there are things you can do to minimize the stress and anxiety your job is causing in your life. Here are some suggestions for coping with job-related stress:

- **Exercise before going to work:** Physical exertion is a great way to relieve or reduce stress, so try exercising a little before you go to the office. Put in some time on the treadmill or sign up for a morning spin class.
- **Take breaks during the workday:** If you have a job where you are at a desk all day get up and walk around for five minutes. Stretch your legs with a walk around your floor or building to clear your mind. Think about something besides work-related tasks while walking.
- **Smile:** It seems too easy, but simply having a smile on your face can help reduce stress levels. Think about how you interact with other people; do you not enjoy being greeted more by a smiling person than by somebody who is frowning or who looks mad? Give people a smile when you see them and watch your work environment slowly brighten up.
- **Avoid confrontational situations:** If there is a specific person you are having difficulty with at your job, try to avoid having interactions with them. Ask to work on a different team or on different tasks. Include other people in all conversations you have with the person so you do not feel isolated and alone with them.
- **Delegate tasks:** Many people try to do too much, even though they work in a “team” environment where many people are supposed to pull equal loads. Allow other people to do some of the tasks you enjoy less, so you can spend more of your time doing the work-related functions you enjoy.
- **Talk with your supervisor:** Employers do not want to have a burned out workforce. High job-related stress levels lead to high job turnover rates. Job turnover cost employers money. Your supervisor or HR department may have some suggestions for minimizing the stress you are feeling at work.
- **Take a vacation:** How long has it been since you were away from the office for more than a three-day weekend? There is a reason you get vacation days every year, and that is so you can take an actual vacation where you are not checking your email or voicemail every two hours for messages. Go someplace, leave your work behind and spend time doing things for yourself, not for your employer.
- **Seek the assistance of a therapist or mental health counselor:** The stress and anxiety we feel can be minimized by our own efforts, but sometimes it is necessary to seek the assistance of a professional. They will have ideas and possible solutions you can use to reduce and eliminate work-related stress.

Resource

- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health www.cdc.gov/niosh/.

Tips for Coping With Stress

Stress is an inevitable part of our lives. We have all experienced it to some degree: during an argument with a parent or sibling; while speaking to a large group; while trying to finish a school project. Our experiences in an increasingly complex world constantly require us to adapt to changes and cope with stressors. Learning how to identify and manage stress can help prevent physical and psychological problems, increase your chances of future success and promote a longer, healthier life.

The way we think and respond to life's challenges promotes stress. For example, the more impatient, demanding, controlling or submissive we are, the more we are bound to experience stress. Stress can be a learned response to everyday life events.

Effects of Stress

To a certain degree, feeling stressed is a normal, healthy response to life's events and challenges. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. Many experts define stress as the body's reaction to change. It is natural for our bodies to trigger a fight-or-flight response to potentially dangerous situations. A stressful stimulus promotes a chemical reaction that produces adrenaline and increases energy.

However, over time the body's continued response to regular stress can lead to an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, heightened anxiety and an overall strain on the system. Unrelieved tension builds up and may cause unhealthy symptoms.

Immediate physiological symptoms of stress include:

- Hyperventilation (rapid, shallow breathing)
- Profuse sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased urination
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Fatigue

Conditions linked to stress include:

- Musculoskeletal pain (e.g., backaches, neck pain)
- Migraines and headaches
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Gastrointestinal disorders (e.g., chronic heartburn, ulcers)
- Skin diseases
- Cardiovascular disorders (e.g., high blood pressure)
- Colitis
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Diabetes
- Asthma

Behavioral symptoms of stress include:

- Irritability
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Bad habits (e.g., biting your nails or grinding your teeth)
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to act due to fear or indecision
- Lack of concentration
- Substance abuse

Ways to Cope with Stress

Seek support. Do not wait until you reach your breaking point. If you begin to feel stressed, talk to your parents, your guidance counselor or your friends. They may be able to provide new ways that you can try to help alleviate stress. It is important to recognize and admit that you are feeling anxious and stressed. Pay attention to your body's physical signs of stress (e.g., headaches, stomach discomfort). If the stress becomes overwhelming, talk to your parents about getting some professional help.

Try to identify the causes of stress. By recognizing the real reasons behind your tension, you can learn to feel more in control and change the source of the stress. If you are not sure why you feel stressed, retrace your steps: perhaps it stems from a forgotten event from yesterday or last night's disturbing dream.

Ask yourself these five questions:

1. What is the worst thing that can happen?
 2. Is there anything more I can do to improve the situation?
 3. How will this outcome affect my life in the long run?
 4. What can I learn from this?
 5. What advice would I give to someone else in this situation?
- Accept stress as an everyday part of life. Often the best way to cope is to "go with the flow", to accept those stressors that you can not currently change.
 - Laugh and learn. Instead of getting irritated, laugh at life's annoyances and learn from your mistakes. Humor is a powerful tool in helping build resilience, the ability to bounce back from negative events.
 - Nurture those relationships that matter. More interpersonal contact with the right people can help relieve stress. Open up to others about your problems, and accept help when it is offered. Spend less time with negative, stress-inducing friends or acquaintances.
 - Develop a timeline of short- and long-term goals. List challenging but realistic objectives for yourself. Analyze and update these goals over time. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations and too many lofty goals. Attempt challenges that are doable, and tackle the easiest first.
 - Focus on the positives. Recognize that for everything that may go wrong, there may be multiple things that go right. Be proud of your accomplishments, and celebrate your successes.
 - Break from routines at school and at home. Monotony also can cause stress. Remember you can change the script of your life.
 - Examine your thought patterns. Often it is our thoughts that determine whether we interpret a situation as stressful. Listen to your inner voice to discover thought patterns that may be contributing to your overall stress level. Write down responses to that inner voice so that you can access these responses the next time you feel stressed.

Personal Life Tips

- Get enough rest. Doctors recommend getting at least eight hours of sleep a night.
- Exercise regularly. Swimming, running, brisk walking, aerobic exercises and other repetitive fitness activities are especially beneficial.
- Engage in fulfilling activities. Take a little time each day for something you like to do: a hobby, a walk with the family dog, an hour with a good book, a fun outing with friends, etc.
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants. These common drugs actually can induce stress and anxiety. A simple step like switching to decaffeinated coffee can have a real effect on your stress level.
- Avoid alcohol, tranquilizers and recreational drugs. These may contribute to anxiety and depression and an increased sense of loss of control.

Relaxation 101

Try these techniques to help you relax and reduce stress:

- **Breathing exercises:** Drawing slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm (the spot just under your ribcage) promotes a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide than chest or shoulder breathing. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this while lying on your back.
- **Yoga and stretching exercises:** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Meditation and imagery techniques:** By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly. Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; alternatively, let your mind go blank. Do not fight stressful thoughts. Instead, think of these thoughts as floating in one ear and out the other and being replaced in your mind by calmer images.
- **Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques:** These involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. For example, make a fist and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand, and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, limbs, etc.

Resources

- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Institutes of Health (NIH): <http://health.nih.gov>
- Mental Health America: www.nmha.org
- What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition caused by a terrifying event. Someone with PTSD feels emotionally numb and has persistent, frightening thoughts and memories of his or her ordeal.

PTSD, first brought to public attention by war veterans, can result from a variety of traumatic incidents.

These include:

- Kidnapping
- Serious accidents
- Natural disasters
- Violent attacks such as a mugging, rape or torture

The triggering event may be something that the patient actually experienced or merely witnessed. PTSD can occur at any age.

Depression, substance abuse or anxiety can accompany PTSD. Individuals suffering from PTSD may become easily irritated or have violent outbursts. In severe cases, individuals may have trouble working or socializing. They also may have sleep problems, feel detached or numb and startle easily.

Sufferers may lose interest in activities they used to enjoy or have trouble feeling affectionate.

For PTSD sufferers, seeing things that remind them of the incident may be very distressing, leading them to avoid certain places or situations that bring back those memories.

Anniversaries of the event often are very difficult to handle. In general, the symptoms of PTSD seem to be worse if the traumatic event was initiated by a person, such as a rape, as opposed to an event, like a flood.

Ordinary events can serve as reminders of the trauma and trigger flashbacks. A flashback may make the person lose touch with reality and re-enact the event for a period of seconds, hours or even days. A person having a flashback usually believes that the traumatic event is happening all over again.

Most PTSD sufferers' symptoms begin within three months of the trauma. However, occasionally the illness does not show up until years after the traumatic event.

While some people recover within six months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases, the condition may be chronic.

Seek treatment if you or someone you know has symptoms of PTSD. A visit to the family physician is usually the best place to start for help.

A physician can determine whether the symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder, some other medical condition or a combination of factors. For a physician to diagnose PTSD, generally the symptoms must last for more than a month. Usually, a physician will refer the patient to a counselor, therapist or a mental-health professional.

Psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, is an integral part of treatment. Being exposed to a reminder of the trauma, such as returning to the scene of a rape, sometimes helps as well.

Support from family and friends can help speed recovery, while antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications can ease the symptoms of depression and sleep problems.

Resources

- National Center for PTSD: www.ncptsd.va.gov
- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress: <http://aaets.org>

How well do you cope with stress?

Do you frequently feel frustrated and exhausted from too much responsibility and too little time? Do you have trouble sleeping or finding time to relax? You may be having difficulty handling the stress in your life. Take this quiz to find out how well you cope with stress.

1. I feel I have a supportive social network.
 - Yes (10 points)
 - No (0 points)
2. I actively pursue a hobby.
 - Yes (10 points)
 - No (0 points)
3. I participate in at least one social activity per month.
 - Yes (10 points)
 - No (0 points)
4. I am within 10 pounds of my ideal body weight.
 - Yes (15 points)
 - No (0 points)
5. I practice some form of deep relaxation at least three times a week. (Deep relaxation includes meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery and yoga.)
 - Yes (15 points)
 - No (0 points)
6. On an average, I exercise 30 minutes per day.
 - No (0 points)
 - One day a week (5 points)
 - Two days a week (10 points)
 - Three days a week (15 points)
 - Four days a week (20 points)
 - Five days a week (25 points)
 - Six days a week (30 points)
 - Seven days a week (35 points)
7. I eat two nutritionally balanced meals per day. (A nutritionally balanced meal is low in fat and high in vegetables, fruits and whole-grain products.)
 - No (0 points)
 - Once a week (5 points)
 - Twice a week (10 points)
8. Every week, I do something that I really enjoy.
 - Yes (5 points)
 - No (0 points)
9. I have a place in my home which I use for relaxation and/or solitude.
 - Yes (10 points)
 - No (0 points)
10. I practice time management techniques daily. (This includes planning ahead, keeping a calendar, prioritizing and setting deadlines.)
 - Yes (10 points)
 - No (0 points)
11. I smoke daily.
 - Yes (0 points)
 - No (30 points)
12. I can stop drinking after two alcoholic drinks.
 - Yes (35 points)
 - No (0 points)
13. I take medication (over the counter/prescribed) to fall asleep on a regular basis.
 - Yes (0 points)
 - No (35 points)
14. On an average, I bring my work home during the week.
 - No (25 points)
 - One day a week (20 points)
 - Two days a week (15 points)
 - Three days a week (10 points)
 - Four days a week (5 points)
 - Every day of the week (0 points)

Your Score

Add up your points to find out how well you cope with stress. To learn effective ways to reduce stress and improve your work-life balance using your employee assistance program, talk to the GuidanceResources representative at the ComPsych® table today, or call GuidanceResources at your toll-free number. Services are confidential and available at no cost to you.

145 points and above

Congratulations! You have an excellent score. You are able to handle stress in an effective and healthy manner.

101-144 points

You are able to cope with stress in an effective and healthy manner. Be sure to keep exercising, eating a healthy diet, relaxing and avoiding alcohol and tobacco.

51-100 points

You have adequate skills to cope with common stress. You can improve the way you handle stress with the following suggestions:

- Exercise for 30 minutes, at least three times per week.
- Take some time each week for an activity you enjoy such as pursuing a hobby, going for a walk, listening to music, reading a book or playing with a pet.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals full of vegetables, fruits and whole grains.
- Avoid using medication, alcohol or other substances to help you sleep or relax.
- Stop smoking cigarettes.
- If possible, leave your work at the office.

0-50 points

You may not be effectively coping with stress. Your employee assistance program is a good place to learn healthy strategies for managing stress, learning to prioritize and finding resources to help you balance your work, family and personal relationships.

In addition, you can improve the way you handle stress with these suggestions:

- Exercise for 30 minutes, at least three times per week.
- Carve out some time for yourself each week to do the things you like to do, such as pursuing a hobby, going for a walk, listening to music, reading a book or playing with a pet.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals full of vegetables, fruits and whole grains.
- Avoid using medication, alcohol or other substances to help you sleep or relax.
- Stop smoking cigarettes.
- If possible, leave your work at the office.

For more information on this and other topics contact GuidanceResources or your HR department.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.