9 Helping ourselves to do this work

The work of helping others can be energizing and fulfilling. But sometimes, we can become over-stressed and left feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. Being aware of our own feelings and taking care of ourselves helps us stay healthy and better able to promote social justice, well-being, and mental health for the whole community.

To get through this work, I remind myself of 2 things. First, with the resources I have, I can't help everyone. Second, I will not blame myself for my stress and burnout. Society created this mess and whether I can do a lot or only a little, we are all in this together.

The daily hassles and past hardships of our own lives help define who we are and are part of what makes us good at helping others. They also complicate our interactions with others. The ideas and experiences we bring to a situation include assumptions and prejudices we might not be aware of, so making a space to examine our own issues is important. This is especially true when we are working with others from a different background or culture, and when relations seem more difficult than usual. Noticing how systems and situations create burnout are often first steps to strategies to lower collective stress in our groups and workplaces (see pages 148 to 150).

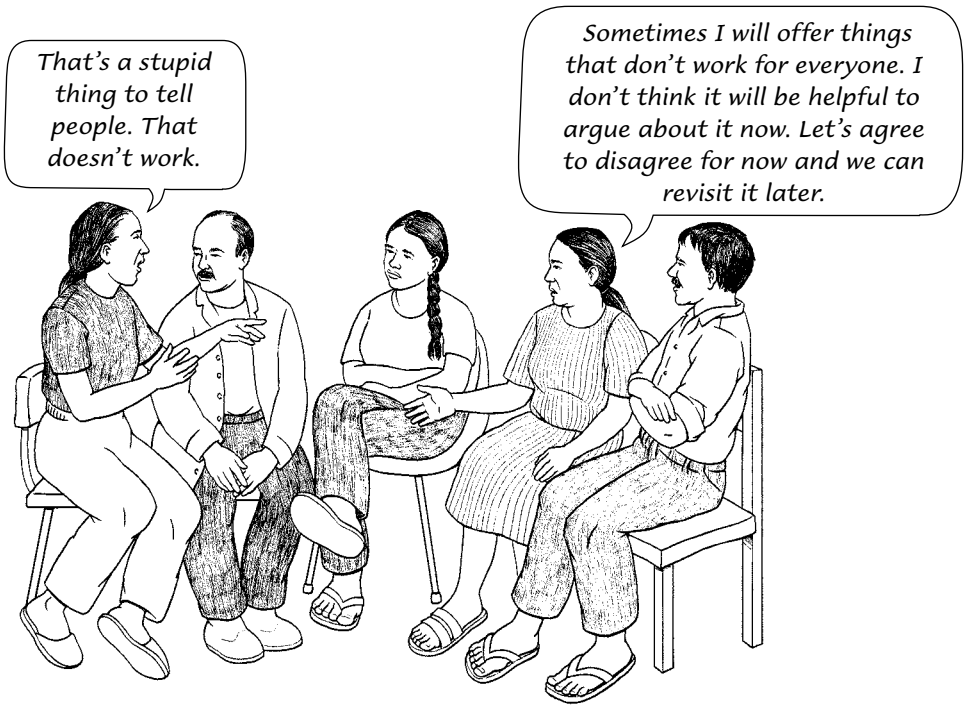
Noticing how we react to others and what to do about it

People are not as separate from one another as it sometimes seems. We affect one another's emotional and even physical states, often without realizing it. When one person in a room yawns, others may begin to yawn too. Emotional responses, such as impatience, ridicule, being dismissive, and others, also can spread through interactions. Being aware of how your own history and situation may affect or be affected by other people's emotions, frame of mind, and patterns of interacting can help your work with others move foward and avoid getting off track.

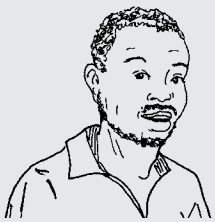
Working with people you find "difficult"

If you facilitate groups, are involved in peer counseling, or simply are in contact with lots of people, there will be some you or others find hard to work with. Maybe they ignore what you or others say, talk a lot, or are easily angered. When you find a person "being difficult," try to understand what it is about them that bothers you. Sometimes, it is because our usual way of relating, maybe one we have been trained to do, just doesn't work with them. Sometimes it is because they remind us of someone we had problems with in the past. And sometimes, it is because they limit the participation of others. Whatever the cause, our response to their behavior can make a one-on-one conversation or a group process go off track. It can help to remember:

- The problem is not because of you. The person may be having a bad day, feeling a lot of anxiety, be under extra stress, or have limited social skills. If you are prepared, you can remain calm and tell yourself: "This doesn't have to do with me. They want to draw me in, but I won't let that happen." This can prevent you from responding negatively or with anger to a difficult interaction.
- Even if you don't fully understand why the person is acting a certain way, use your self-awareness to understand why the person is generating a reaction in you, perhaps because of the person's inner "story," (see page 145). Focus on how not to get pulled into an argument or unhelpful exchange.



When a person you are trying to help is hard to help. The stress and frustration that often motivates people to look for help can make them interact in less than positive ways. You can aim to set a tone and create an environment that promotes respect, both to and from your co-workers and to and from anyone looking for help. Posting reminders for appropriate respectful behaviors can help—the organization's rules or perhaps a calming or humorous poster on a waiting area wall. But you may also want to have a specific plan about what to do when a person is rude or insults the person trying to help them or others in the space.



Most staff at our drop-in site for testing street drugs can relate to hardship and try to accept people where they are at. But sometimes people don't love you back. If someone becomes verbally abusive—maybe they say something racist or homophobic—a co-worker will step in immediately and the person who was attacked can leave—it's not their job to put up with it or to defend themselves. The co-worker can say, "We don't talk to people like that and we'd appreciate it if you don't use that language here. That's why she left. I'm going to help you instead. Now what can I do for you?" This is how we signal: "Hey, that's not cool." We want to be clear without further escalating the situation.

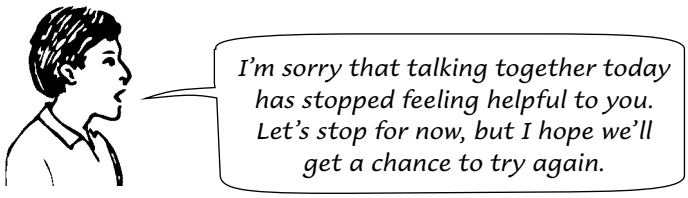
HOW TO Think about people's inner "stories"

A person might not be aware of their behavior patterns or the stories they tell themselves, even when these are a deep part of how they see themselves or what drives them. These patterns can affect what they expect of you or cause you to react a certain way. Here are some examples.

"**Everyone betrays me or ends up abandoning me.**" Sometimes a person is so convinced this always happens to them that they act to make it come true. As a helper, you might think you can change their pattern if you are trustworthy and extra helpful. But if they believe everyone will fail them, they may decide you have let them down no matter what. Instead of telling yourself that you failed, or feeding their belief that you failed, see if instead you can step *outside* their story.

HOW TO Think about people's inner "stories" *(continued)*

"If I'm not the center of attention, I will not get what I need." As good listeners we often try to give people what they want, even those who demand constant attention. But it may never be enough. Meanwhile, others in a group may get frustrated if one person and their needs dominate. This can lead to disruption, provoking the person to leave abruptly to avoid not being the center of attention or cause someone else to leave the group. You may not be able to prevent it, but you may be able to maintain the group by saying something like:



If it is just the two of you when the person gets upset or lashes out, you might just end the interaction for the moment.

There are many other deeply-held stories. If you find yourself acting differently for a person, you may have been pulled into playing a role in their story. Perhaps you are working extra hard for them while paying less attention to the needs of yourself or others. Maybe you find yourself avoiding them, or not giving them your best skills, or showing annoyance. When this begins to happen, take a moment to reflect and ask: "What about this doesn't feel right to me?"

You don't have to figure out the other person's whole story or talk to them about it. Usually, people (including ourselves) are not aware of their powerful inner stories and their effects—it is just how things are for them. It can take a long time for them to change, and unless they are willing to talk openly with you about it, they may feel you are blaming or judging them if you try.

When I see someone has a certain way of being, I figure that's their business. I don't justify my role to them—that's my business! But I can change how I act with them. If I go out of my way a lot to help them, for example, I can change the pattern: "My schedule won't let me continue to make calls to set up your appointments. Maybe someone else can help until you feel OK doing it on your own." Setting limits may lead to the person finding a better solution. But in any case, it helps me stay clear in my role and available to all the people I am committed to helping.

When issues feel too close to our own experiences

Sometimes it can be hard to work with people who are struggling with the same issues we have struggled with ourselves, for example, when a survivor of domestic abuse is supporting someone facing a situation very similar to their experience. Knowing yourself and your reactions, and thinking through your limits can prepare you to better respond.

- Wounds may never completely heal. When yours are touched, how will they trigger your grief or anger? What can you do to prepare for those moments? What support will you need during and after?
- What worked for you might not work for others. Allow each person to find their own path through their situation and toward healing.
- Plan when, how often, and with whom you can talk about how the work makes you feel.

If you find yourself continually reliving your own trauma, you might want to work instead with people whose experiences differ from your own. Or perhaps you can provide support without being the person who listens or counsels directly. It is not a failure to be unhappy doing work that harms you.

Our volunteer peer counseling group helps people who were recently incarcerated and are struggling. Having been there ourselves, we want to help, but some days it can be really hard to listen. We are strict about all counselors meeting every 2 weeks to reflect on our own feelings, to release and process them. Sometimes we talk about setting better boundaries between this work and our own experiences, but mostly we don't focus on "what to do." Just knowing we have this space for ourselves helps.

Knowing when the stress is too much

Burnout is a stress overload. It can happen to anyone, whether a parent, caregiver, student, or worker. In many work settings, burnout happens when we are asked to help people with problems caused by conditions—poverty, racism, violence against women, and other structural inequalities—that can only be solved by social change. Even though we may repeatedly improve things for one individual or group at a time, the supply of problems seems never-ending. As if that wasn't hard enough, our organizations and agencies almost always lack the resources we need to do our work well. When our tasks move from being "a challenge" to feeling overwhelming, that's burnout. Although burnout is caused by injustice in the workplace and society in general, it is often experienced as personal failure.

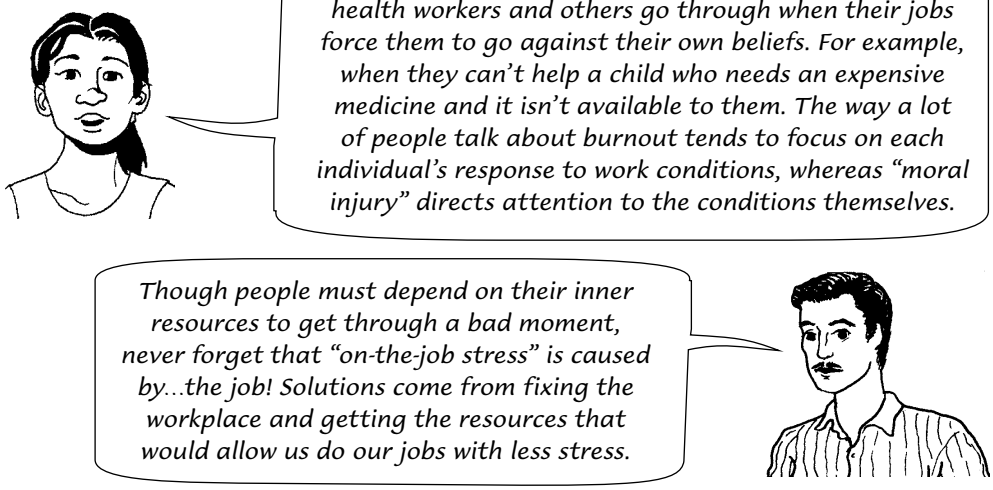
Burnout creates mental and physical exhaustion. For some people, burnout shows in the body with problems such as difficulty sleeping, headaches or other body aches, intestinal problems, or lack of energy. It can create emotional problems like irritability, anger, numbness, an inability to be emotionally involved, and depression. People often feel they must face these difficulties alone and blame themselves for not being good or strong enough, but **the real problem is the conditions causing the burnout**, not you.

Avoiding burnout means knowing the work we do is hard. We witness people going through overwhelming experiences. To be able to help, we need to be prepared and well-rested. We need to "walk the talk" when it comes to caring for our own wellness and follow the same advice we would give others.

At my office, we have a code word for when our workload, personal life, or their combination becomes too much. "I'm in the ditch" means feeling like you're a truck stuck in the mud. Digging out by yourself is too hard, so let someone throw you a tow rope! When one of us says: "Ditch!" others pitch in right away with help, give you space, or at least make sure you eat lunch! Our supervisors do this too, modeling that it's OK to admit things are "too much" and that looking out for each other is part of our jobs.

Helping the helpers. When helping people get through health or other problems caused or made worse by inequality and injustice, how is it possible to sustain commitment over a long time? The *Migrant Clinicians Network* (MCN) supports a vast network of health professionals who advocate for and provide services to migrants and others in difficult situations. Within MCN, the Witness to Witness (W2W) Program offers concrete support to health care workers whose care for stressed-out people is itself stressful. The program recognizes the high emotional cost from feeling empathy and compassion day after day, alongside the distress from constantly witnessing the huge harms from systemic and structural causes that don't go away, leading to an endless flow of people who need help.

Witness to Witness sets up peer support groups, offers one-on-one sessions that provide a "listening ear" for clinicians, and helps organizations look at the workplace to see what could make it less stressful.



Follow our own advice

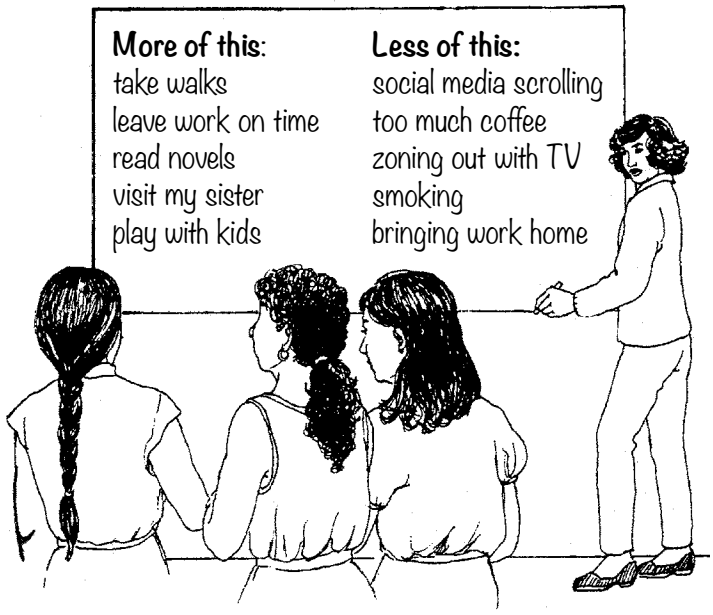
"Take care of yourself so you can take care of others." It's so easy to say, but so hard to do! For many of us, it can feel like one more task we don't have time for, one more demand we can't meet.

Just as we look to already-existing strengths, knowledge, and connections to promote community mental health, we can draw on these same resources to address our own stress.

HOW TO Identify and look for solutions to stress overload

When you know you are not the only one at work or among your friends feeling overwhelmed, you can support each other by talking about what causes your stresses and how to better cope with them, both individually and as a group (see the activity on page 151). Besides describing what causes stress, also focus on what helps relieve it.

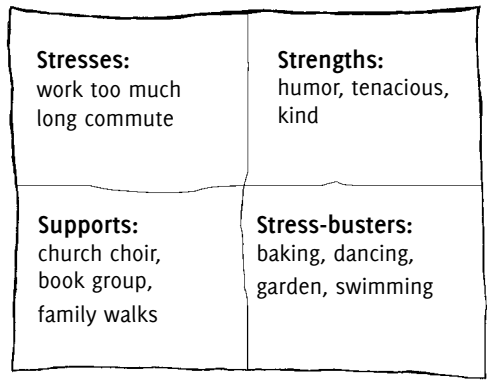
- Things you do that help you feel better: walking, playing or watching sports, cooking, reading or writing, engaging with music and art, spiritual practices, gardening, caring for pets. Can you do more of these or do them with others? (See pages 22 to 24.)
- Supportive family, friendships, networks, and community connections: look to your religious or spiritual community, take classes to learn new skills, join groups for recreation, outings, or activism.
- Are there ways you handle stress that you'd like to stop or change? Maybe you and a friend can check in on how each of you is doing with making some changes.



ACTIVITY Find stress-busters

Identifying and discussing what we have available to us—our personal strengths, social connections, and other resources—can help to lower the stress in a workplace and for the individuals in it.

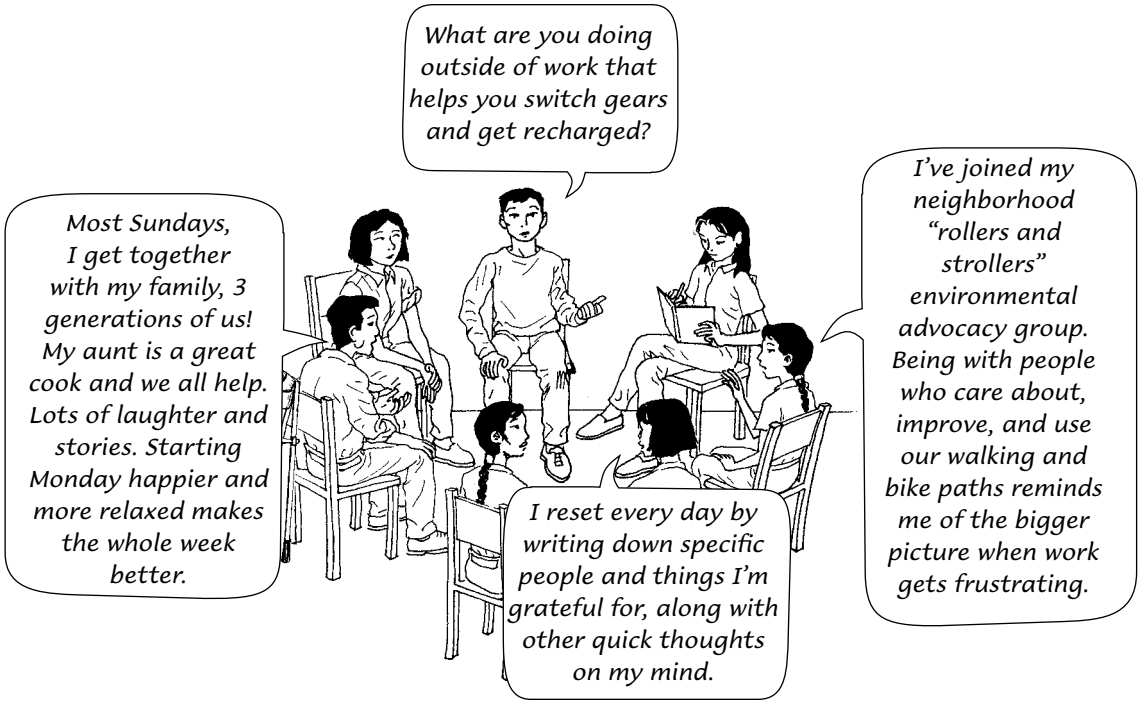
1. Discuss these or similar questions as a group:
   - What are your common causes of stress at work?
   - What are the causes of stress for the people you help through your work?
   - How does your stress affect how you work with both your co-workers and the people you help?
   - What do you do to support others in reducing stress?
   - What do you do to help yourself avoid burnout?
2. Have each person fold a piece of paper in 4. Label and list for each section:
   - your **stresses**
   - your **strengths**
   - your **supports**
   - your **stress-busters**



3. Ask each person to share a few of their examples with the group, then discuss:
   - What do you do in common? What do you do differently? What new ideas will you add to your own list?
   - How can you support each other individually and as a group to reduce stress?

Make time to check in every week or two about what practices lessen the stress, make it worse, or show the need for bigger changes in the workplace.

I get fed up with being told to buy scented candles and take a bath. Self-care for me is spending time with friends to do something meaningful and creative, something that reminds me of the strength of working together and being part of a community.



Stronger now, stronger in the long run

Many community-based organizations were created to challenge the inequality and injustice harming people. Many of us working in these groups have a strong moral and political commitment to change unfair conditions and organize people to find solutions.

While there is no shortage of problems that need urgent attention, there is often a great shortage of resources with which to do it. This puts an enormous stress on those of us who earn our living this way. Not only are the salaries and benefits less than in the for-profit world, but the lack of reliable funding makes our jobs unstable. We put up with being understaffed and overworked because we don't want to abandon the people we serve. The injustices are huge and progress is painfully slow. Sometimes it feels like the challenges require superheroes—which we are not.

Supporting community mental health means building organizations and workplaces that encourage participation, don't burn people out, and move toward the social change our communities need, deserve, and demand. While every organization must do this based on their specific situation, these positive practices can improve almost all non-profits and service-oriented organizations:

Support autonomy and reduce hierarchy. Not every organization is suited to a collective structure, and not every person in a workplace wants an equal amount of responsibility. However, workers who control more of the decision-making about their work tend to find ways of working that increase their productivity while decreasing their stress. Give yourself and others the space to adjust work tasks so there is still accountability for doing them, but so they are done in a way that feels more efficient or more rewarding.

More equality in rewards. Large differences in salaries and benefits tell workers that some people are valued more than others. While still rewarding people for seniority, responsibilities, professional credentials, and achievements, a fairer workplace limits salary differences so the gaps are not large. It also creates paths to promotion and changing positions within the organization.

Our organization made a rule that the highest paid person, our Executive Director, cannot be paid more than 2.5 times what the lowest paid, entry-level position earns.

Regional equality. Set salaries to be roughly equivalent to those of other area workplaces. This helps limit turnover and build community.

Paid time off. Especially when jobs are emotionally draining and people struggle to meet client and community needs, time off is a necessity, not a luxury. Besides weekends, make sure there is at least one holiday or other paid day off every month and adequate vacation time. Rest and relaxation keep people able to work for the community, and they don't take anything away from the community. The ability to take personal time for doctor appointments and to care for children or others also keeps anxiety lower.

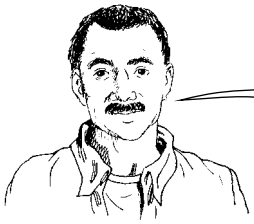
Look for shared problems that can be solved

Many social change, care-giving, or social service organizations find that it builds morale and improves workplace relations if they can regularly identify and fix workplace issues affecting many people. Involving people from across the organization often generates good, practical ideas about how to make the workplace better. Creating an open culture of addressing problems together can lead to effective and realistic solutions.

Our intake forms required too much clicking, too many needless questions. They took too much time and worsened ergonomic problems. We cut the form's length in half and changed to software that was much simpler. It was a big relief in our daily work.

We reactivated a workplace improvement committee. They use anonymous surveys to get feedback, report to our all-staff meetings monthly, and give updates on what is in-progress and what has already been done. It makes us feel more in control of our workplace.

The core of our work is home-based outreach, but policies hadn't been updated in 5 years. Travel costs had risen and we spend more time now with each family. We organized an agency-wide review so policies now match our actual workload and costs.



Our unused outdoor patio now has a mural, tables, and a container garden. Many of us now take lunch breaks together. The chance to laugh and know each other better lifts everyone's mood.

We help people whose lives are really intense. Hearing it day after day can be too much. We get numb to it—our empathy drains away. We now divide the work into administrative work days and days we provide counseling. The result is fewer people quitting due to burnout.

Celebrate ourselves and our victories

So much of our work addresses long-term problems and the need for structural change that we often fail to recognize our small victories, completed projects, and successful transitions out of particularly stressful times. Celebrating with a group lunch, an afternoon off, a trip to a special event, or another enjoyable activity helps build staff unity and the feeling that we are valued for what we do.