

Transforming Vicarious Trauma: Tips for Caregivers

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For LEAP (Look to End Abuse Permanently)

1. ***Be Mindful.*** Because you are empathically connected to traumatized patients, you may be “infected” by their traumatic stress symptoms. As a result, you are likely to experience disruptions in memory, feeling, your body, behaviors, and relationships that are both acute and cumulative.
2. ***Invest in a Regular Coping Routine.*** Engage yourself with a regular, active, and intentional routine of self-care activities. Include a range of activities that replenish or restore your body, your mind, your heart, your spirit, and your social connections. Think *escape, rest, play*.
3. ***Avoid Excessive Inactivity.*** Although it may seem desirable to spend the evening silently watching television, chronic inactivity is not restorative. That being said, activities that explicitly have no goal orientation may be an important part of your overall coping plan.
4. ***Know and Respect Your Style.*** Learn, respect, and nurture your own style. When overwhelmed, you may want to go deep into your emotions and talk in depth; you might instead prefer a healthy distraction such as a period of intense exercise; or you might prefer other strategies altogether. Try a variety of activities over time to discover what combination is most potent for you.
5. ***Conduct Daily Rituals.*** Short rituals at the beginning and end of your workday can signal your body, mind, and heart about the transition between your professional and personal life. For example, consider starting or ending your workday with a cup of tea, a moment of silence, or a brief visualization; when arriving home, consider changing your clothes and showering to signal a new beginning.
6. ***Plan Ahead for Occasional Acute Episodes of Overwhelm.*** Certain stories or patients can overwhelm even the most resilient caregiver. These more acute episodes can last hours to days. Recognizing these symptoms and enacting a more intensive self-care plan will help restore your sense of control. To combat physiological arousal, intensive aerobic activity is usually recommended.
7. ***Increase Your Emotional Management.*** When emotionally overwhelmed, simply accepting your overwhelm, tolerating the unwanted feelings, and knowing that they will naturally reduce over time can be helpful. These are called “tolerance” or “acceptance” strategies, and they prevent your self-judgments from adding to your distress. Balance these strategies with more active “change” strategies in which you engage in activities (such as exercise, meditation, prayer, and/or seeking support) to reduce your negative feelings and increase positive feelings.
8. ***Discover The Positive Meaning.*** To counterbalance feelings of despair and hopelessness, intentionally cultivate an appreciation of strengths and resilience, look for small signs that you’ve made a difference, and praise yourself and others for the amazing daily efforts you make. *You are an everyday hero.*
9. ***Cultivate Creativity.*** The opposite of destruction is creation. When you engage yourself in creative activities (such as art, music, dance, writing, cooking, gardening, and even spontaneous acts of humor or improvisation), you actively restore balance to your world.
10. ***Know When to Ask For Help.*** Although many people prefer privacy, when your reactions begin to negatively affect your personal and professional life, it is time to accept that you may need outside help. As a caregiver, you have a right to receive care, too. Accepting help doesn’t mean you aren’t strong or professional. Rather, it means you are strong enough to respect yourself and ethical enough to care for yourself so you can continue to provide care to others.