

# Helping the helpers

For some years now, it has been acknowledged that support programmes cannot afford to focus on the affected people alone. Helpers and other people exposed to emotional stress can themselves enter a state of crisis as a result of their work. This is especially so for young and inexperienced helpers. These facts have strong implications for the Red Cross - Red Crescent Movement, where a significant part of the volunteer force consists of young people.

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The traditional heroic role of helpers includes expectations that they are selfless, tireless, and somehow superhuman. Helpers are, however, also affected by their jobs. Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers will often leave their jobs with a feeling of not having done enough, because needs in many situations are so overwhelming that they by far exceed their capabilities. A volunteer might be troubled by the tormenting stories of disaster survivors, first aid volunteers may feel guilt at the death of a patient, or volunteers in HIV/AIDS programmes feel despair faced with the repetitive cycle of death. It is not uncommon that volunteers are also infected and must cope with their own fears of death and deterioration as they assist others.

This module emphasizes ways in which helpers can support themselves and their colleagues by recognizing the signs of stress and burnout, and learning techniques which may help to alleviate or prevent severe emotional reactions. While it is not aimed specifically at programme managers, it does demonstrate the role that managers have in creating and sustaining a supportive working environment if helpers are themselves to be supported.

## Learning objectives

At the end of this module, participants should be able to:

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6-2

- Describe how reactions to stress may impact on helpers
- Give details of warning signs of stress or burnout among helpers
- Describe how to provide psychological support to helpers
- Give details of self-care methods for helpers.

## 6.1 Stress in the lives of helpers

Stress is inherent in many Red Cross - Red Crescent activities. Apart from the usual job stresses, the following situations constitute a challenge:

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6-3

- Being part of the collective crisis
- Repeated exposure to grim experiences such as handling dead bodies, dealing with multiple casualties, powerful emotions and tormenting stories of people affected
- Carrying out physically difficult, exhausting, or dangerous tasks
- Lacking sleep and feeling chronically fatigued because of demanding tasks



- Facing the perceived inability ever to do enough
- Feeling guilt over access to food, shelter, and other resources
- Facing moral and ethical dilemmas
- Being exposed to the anger and apparent lack of gratitude of some affected people
- Being detached from your support system at home
- Feeling frustrated by policies and decisions of superiors in the organization.

Helpers are exposed to unusual personal demands in the desire to help meet the needs of survivors. The many feelings associated with providing services such as first aid, being close to the centre of the distressing event, and not least dealing with emotionally distressed and physically injured people, need to be addressed. The helpers' situation and problems are often pushed into the background, but after the event they must not hesitate to draw on the support of other people.

Helpers, who are often poorly prepared for their own emotional reactions to their experiences in providing care and relief to others, can be supported at several key points to reduce the likelihood of developing stress-related problems. The primary intervention consists of good, solid information about stress and coping with emotional reactions to difficult situations. Such information educates and prepares helpers to detect their own reactions and offers active options they can take for self-care and peer support. If left unaddressed, these stress factors are likely to affect the helpers' well-being and quality of work. Therefore, self-care is both an essential prerequisite for effectively helping others and a means of maintaining one's fitness to continue in that capacity.<sup>1</sup>

## 6.2 Warning signs of burnout

Burnout may occur after a prolonged period of time on a job. It implies that the stress factors have taken over, and that helpers are no longer able to distance themselves from the situation. Helpers can benefit from learning about burnout, so that they may recognize the signs in themselves as well as in others.

### Activity 6A: Burnout signs

*Small groups (3 or 4). Ask participants to share their own experiences and to try to identify signs of burnout in themselves and in others. Give about 10 minutes to list these signs, and then come back to the main group to share these, and to add any of the symptoms below which are not included among their lists.*

*Purpose of this Activity:*

- *To benefit from the experience and knowledge of participants to bring greater insight to the identification of burnout.*

<sup>1</sup>- Simonsen L and Lo G (2002) *The value of human support when life is painful*. Background paper on first aid and psychological support, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Among the symptoms discussed, participants may have discovered the following:

- Wounded ideals
- Cynicism
- Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by the organization
- Loss of spirit
- Grandiose beliefs about own importance

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6-4

- Heroic but reckless behaviour
- Neglecting one's own safety and physical needs (not needing breaks, sleep, etc.)
- Mistrusting colleagues and supervisors
- Antisocial behaviour
- Excessive tiredness
- Inability to concentrate
- Symptoms of illness or disease
- Sleep difficulties
- Inefficiency
- Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

In preparing for their tasks, helpers must gain a realistic expectation of what they can achieve through their work. They must understand that they cannot help being affected by the work and might need somebody afterwards reviewing what they have been through and assisting them in processing reactions. The helpers, the manager and the organization must all be aware of and respect limitations, both personal and practical. To avoid burning out valuable helpers, it is the responsibility of all concerned to treat each other with compassion and respect.<sup>2</sup>

## 6.3 Caring for the psychological needs of helpers

The needs of helpers are quite similar to those directly affected. A supportive environment is one of the many crucial factors in minimizing stress. This can be achieved in the following ways:

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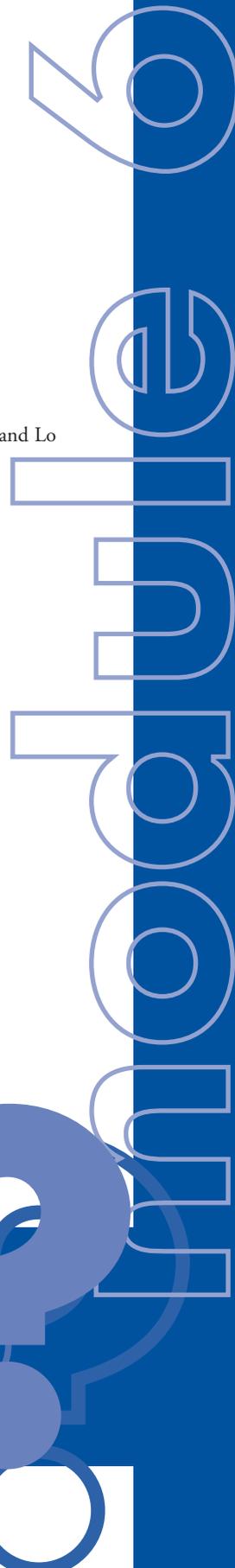
- Guidance and support from managers and peers should be accessible on a daily basis or soon after the event
- An organizational culture of openly talking and sharing problems without fearing the consequences
- Regular and frequent meetings which bring all staff together and foster a feeling of belonging to a team
- Respect for the principle of confidentiality means that people can feel safe in admitting stress and seeking help
- The creation of a culture where getting together after a critical event is the norm, e.g. a peer support system.

Sharing experiences from work has a team building effect and helps to prevent psychological problems. Reactions that are not addressed and processed might lead to a crisis, whereas sharing these difficulties with others will reduce misunderstandings, distortions and incorrect interpretations. A supportive environment where it is not only allowed but also encouraged to talk about emotional reactions and limitations will both ensure the quality and effectiveness of activities and the well-being of helpers.

### Discussion point

Ask the group to comment on the above points, and to discuss their potential for success in particular known work situations. What might the obstacles to implementation be, and how might these be overcome?

2- Simonsen and Lo



## 6.4 Self-help techniques<sup>3</sup>

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A number of self-help techniques have been identified, including:

Remember that your reactions are normal and unavoidable	It is useful to express even frightening and strange feelings.
Be aware of your tension and consciously try to relax	Slow your breathing and relax your muscles.
Talk to someone with whom you feel at ease; describe to him/her what you were thinking or feeling during the critical event	You process the unpleasant experiences when you talk about them.
Draw, paint, write, play music or take exercise. Look for a healthy outlet	Sometimes it is easier to express your feelings by doing rather than talking.
Listen to what people close to you say and think about the event	It has affected them too, and they may share insight that will benefit you.
Take special care of yourself	Try to keep eating well and limit alcohol and tobacco. Physical exercise is good for you because it relieves tension.
Continue to work on routine tasks if it is difficult to concentrate on demanding duties	Tell your peers and team leader/supervisor about how the distressing event has affected you, so that they can understand.
If you cannot sleep or feel too anxious, discuss this with someone you can trust	
Do not self-medicate	Get medical advice.
Go easy on yourself	It takes time to evaluate how you will view things after a distressing event has occurred.
Avoid inflated or perfectionist expectations, either about yourself or others	These can only lead to disappointment and conflict.
After a few weeks if you still feel uneasy about your reactions, you should seek professional advice	

Emotional reactions to distressing events are normal and should be expected both from the people affected and the helpers. The majority of the reactions are short-term with no lasting consequences. Both physical care and psychological support are important to successful recovery.

<sup>3</sup>- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2001), *Managing stress in the field*, IFRC

## Activity 6B: Relieving stress and tension

*Individual and whole group work. Ask participants to spend a few moments writing down five things that help them to relieve stress and tension in themselves.*

*Ask each individual to share their methods with the rest of the group, and flipchart responses. Engage the participants in a general discussion about “recharging their batteries” and ask them to comment on some of the individual suggestions made.*

*Purpose of this Activity:*

- *To share ideas about how to relieve stress and tension, and to discuss the merits of each suggestion.*

## 6.5 Supportive supervision

The traditional role of supervisors is to see that helpers perform with consistent and sufficient effort and to maintain the quality of that work within management standards. However, more recent models of supervision also place supervisors in the role of supporting the emotional and developmental needs of helpers. In other words, supervisors are now expected to nurture helpers as a human resource with limitations on how far those resources should be pushed or stretched.

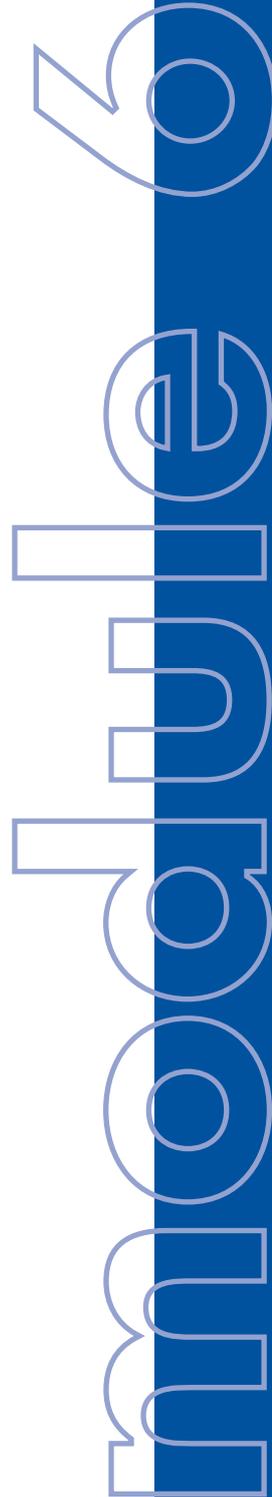
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This is particularly important in the instance of psychological support programme helpers who may well need some psychological support themselves. Supervisors play an important role in this regard by providing helpers with someone they can call on for additional guidance or information to solve the problems of others, or more personally with problems they may be facing. In the Red Cross - Red Crescent context it is recognized that this model will mostly be applied in an informal fashion. One promising alternative, as detailed below, is the teaming of peers into supportive groups that pool their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences for the benefit of each other.

## 6.6 Peer group support

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A group of peers can function not only as an informal support group of people who socialize both during and after work, but also in a formal framework by gathering periodically to discuss the work and problem-solve together. In this way, the more common form of social support, provided by spending leisure time together or interacting cooperatively on the job, is supplemented with a formal tool for improving the skills and effectiveness of all concerned.



## Suggested guidelines for formal peer support

Meetings lasting about one hour should be held as frequently as possible (usually every week)	In extreme circumstances, such meetings might be held daily.
All members should attend meetings whenever possible	Attending this meeting should be as important as doing good work.
Each week a different member takes the role of peer facilitator	All members should gain insight from being in this role.
The meeting should begin with the facilitator presenting the agenda, based on items previously requested by members	Members may add something to the agenda later if time allows.
Each item on the agenda is presented by the person who is requesting input	Each peer gives their input based on their own experiences.
Finally, the person who received the input gives each peer feedback on the effect or influence of their input	In this way peers are made aware of the person's reaction to their input and communication flow is maintained in all directions. At times peers will want to discuss or debate each other's input, which is only natural. This should not be done, however, until each peer has been given the chance to give their input without interruption and has received their feedback. Otherwise, the process will get side-tracked and never be completed.

## Discussion point

Ask the group to consider how peer group support might function in their own work environment, and what might be the advantages. Discuss what the obstacles might be to implementing a peer group support system, and discuss how these obstacles might be overcome.

Ask individuals to recall some difficult times they may have experienced and call on other members of the group to say how they would react in a peer group support situation.

## Review and revision: Taking action

*Provide handout resource material in the form of thumbnail versions of your slides. These will serve as a summary of the session's main points, while acting as triggers for any areas which participants would like to review.*

*Invite participants to ask questions, make comments or give feedback.*

*Give participants the opportunity to follow up the discussion in the way they find most appropriate. For example, ask participants to note some of the major or key issues that have come from the session, and put down some ideas to remind them of how they can help themselves and other volunteers in future work.*

## 6.7 Summary

- Helpers and other people exposed to emotional stress can themselves enter a state of crisis as a result of their work. Support programmes need to recognize this fact, and provide support to workers as well as to affected people.
- Helpers are exposed to unusual personal demands, often finding themselves in extremely challenging situations, and may need to address their own emotional distress.
- Self-care is required in order to maintain fitness to help others. Good information about stress and coping with emotional reactions to different situations is required.
- Burnout can occur after a prolonged period of time on a job. Symptoms include:
  - Wounded ideals
  - Cynicism
  - Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by the organization
  - Loss of spirit
  - Grandiose beliefs about own importance
  - Heroic but reckless behaviours
  - Neglecting one's own safety and physical needs (not needing breaks, sleep, etc.)
  - Mistrusting colleagues and supervisors
  - Antisocial behaviour
  - Excessive tiredness
  - Inability to concentrate
  - Symptoms of illness or disease
  - Sleep difficulties
  - Inefficiency
  - Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs.
- A supportive environment is required if the psychological needs of helpers are to be addressed. A culture of mutual support should be encouraged.
- Self-help techniques include reminding yourself that emotional reactions are normal, talking to others about feelings, and avoiding unrealistic expectations of yourself.
- Supervisory staff can play an important role in the support of helpers, providing additional guidance or information and a supportive environment.
- Peer group support can act as a formal framework within which problems and feelings can be discussed without threat. Peer group meetings require good organization, particularly in respect to information flow. Each member of the group should be allowed to contribute and receive feedback.

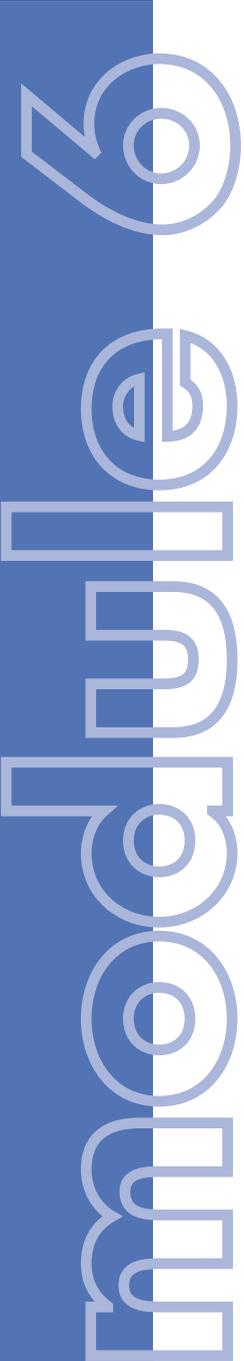


## Helping the helpers

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# Helping the helpers

- As a result of their work, helpers/volunteers can themselves enter a state of crisis
- Often a feeling of not having done enough, overwhelmed by the needs
- Volunteers need to cope with own fears of death and deterioration





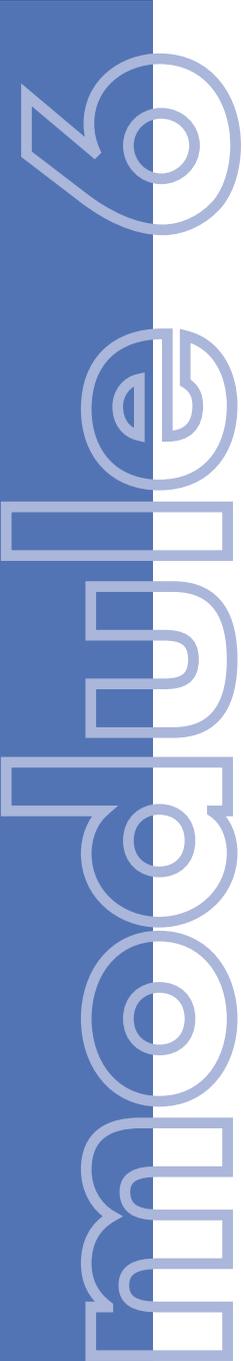


## Helping the helpers

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# Learning objectives

- Describe how reactions to stress may impact on helpers
- Give details of warning signs of stress or burnout among helpers
- Describe how to provide psychological support to helpers
- Give details of self-care methods for helpers







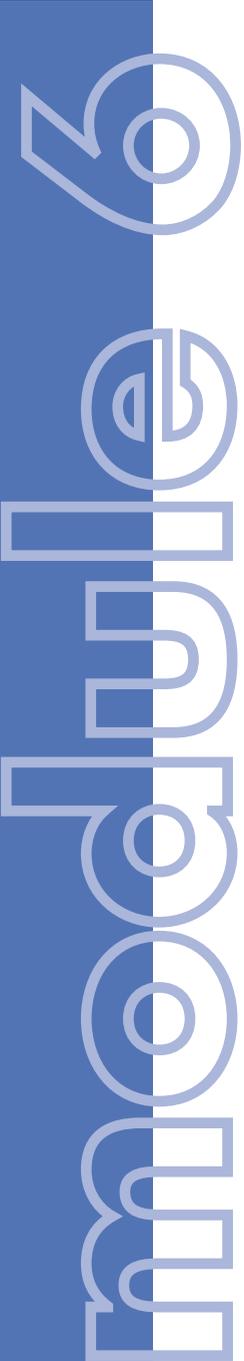
## Helping the helpers

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# Stress in the lives of helpers

## The challenge:

- Being part of the collective crisis
- Repeated exposure to grim experiences
- Carrying out physically difficult, exhausting or dangerous tasks
- Lacking sleep and feeling fatigued
- Facing the perceived inability ever to do enough
- Feeling guilt over access to food, shelter, etc.
- Facing moral and ethical dilemmas
- Being exposed to anger and lack of gratitude
- Being detached from personal support system
- Feeling frustrated by policies and decisions of superiors







## Helping the helpers

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# Warning signs of burnout 1/2

- Wounded ideals
- Cynicism
- Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by the organization
- Loss of spirit
- Grandiose beliefs about own importance
- Heroic but reckless behaviour
- Neglecting personal safety and physical needs
- Mistrusting colleagues and supervisors



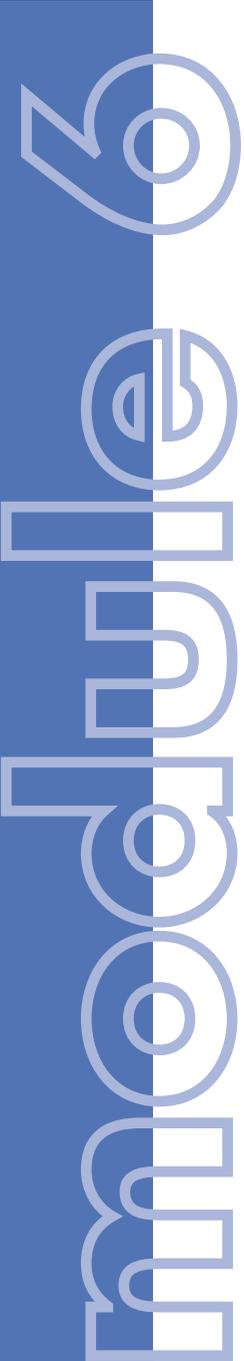


## Helping the helpers

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# Warning signs of burnout 2/2

- Antisocial behaviour
- Excessive tiredness
- Inability to concentrate
- Symptoms of illness or disease
- Sleep difficulties
- Inefficiency
- Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs



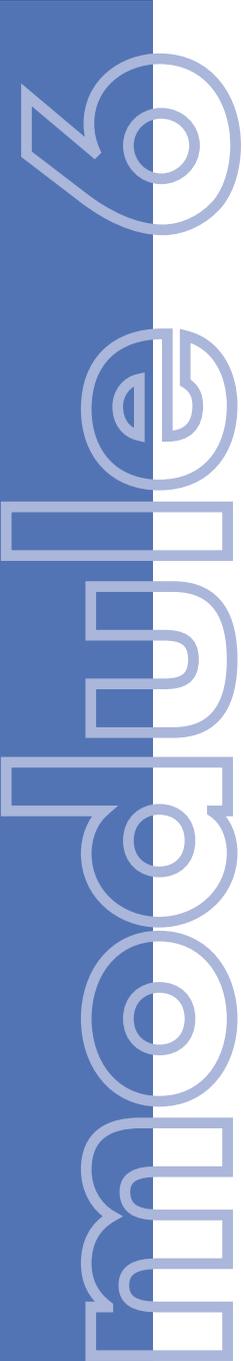




## Helping the helpers

# **Caring for the psychological needs of helpers – Create supportive environment**

- Guidance and support from managers and peers
- Open and sharing organizational culture
- Regular and frequent staff meetings
- Respect for confidentiality
- Creation of peer support system





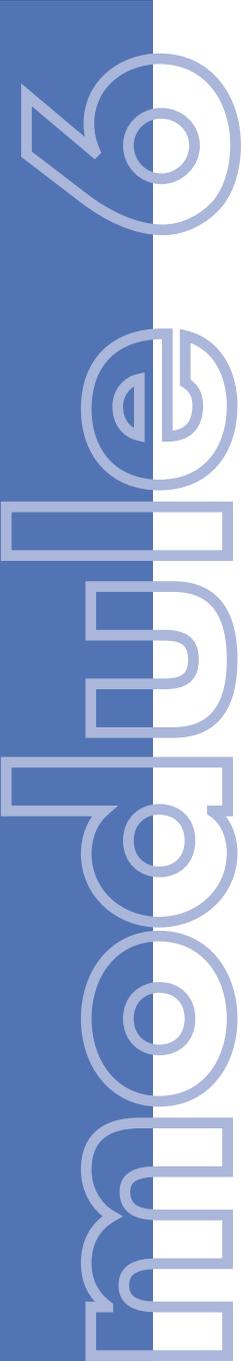


## Helping the helpers

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# Self-help techniques 1/2

- Reactions are normal and unavoidable
- Consciously try to relax
- Talk to someone with whom you feel at ease
- Express your feelings in ways other than talking: draw, paint, play music
- Listen to what people close to you say and think about the event
- Take care of yourself





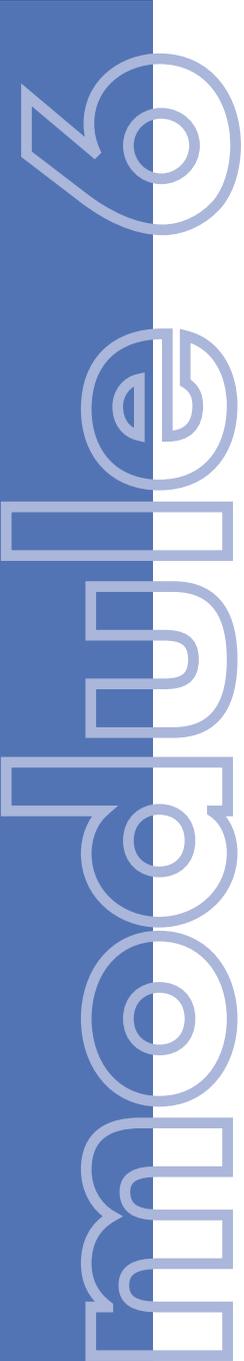


## Helping the helpers

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# Self-help techniques 2/2

- Work on routine tasks
- Discuss fears with someone you can trust
- Do not self-medicate
- Go easy on yourself
- Avoid inflated or perfectionist expectations
- Seek professional advice if reactions continue







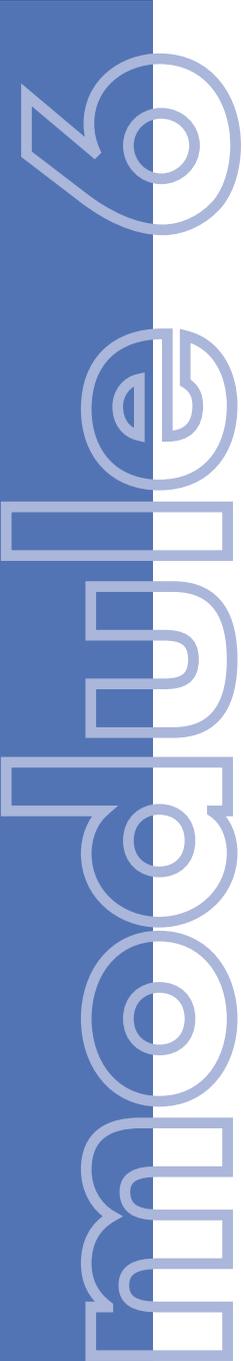
## Helping the helpers

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# Supportive supervision

## Role of supervisors

- Support emotional and developmental needs of helpers
- Identify limitations on how far helpers should be pushed or stretched
- Act as source of advice and help with problems, personal as well as professional







## Helping the helpers

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# Peer group support

- Peers can provide supportive groups, informally and formally
- Regular meetings of peers helpful to discuss work and solve problems together
- All members should attend as frequently as possible, taking turns to act as meeting facilitator
- Group members may request input from their peers on specific problems
- Communication flow maintained by use of formal agenda, with an agreement on lack of interruption and discussion moderated by facilitator





## Helping the helpers

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# Summary 1/3

- Helpers and other people exposed to emotional stress can themselves enter a state of crisis as a result of their work. Support programmes need to recognize this fact, and provide support to workers as well as to affected people.
- Helpers are exposed to unusual personal demands, often finding themselves in extremely challenging situations, and may need to address their own emotional distress.
- Self-care is required in order to maintain fitness to help others. Good information about stress and coping with emotional reactions to different situations is required.





## Helping the helpers

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# Summary 2/3

- Burnout can occur after a prolonged period of time on a job. Symptoms include:
  - Wounded ideals
  - Cynicism
  - Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by the organization
  - Loss of spirit
  - Grandiose beliefs about own importance
  - Heroic but reckless behaviours
  - Neglecting one's own safety and physical needs (not needing breaks, sleep, etc.)
  - Mistrusting colleagues and supervisors
  - Antisocial behaviour
  - Excessive tiredness
  - Inability to concentrate
  - Symptoms of illness or disease
  - Sleep difficulties
  - Inefficiency
  - Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs.





## Helping the helpers

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# Summary 3/3

- A supportive environment is required if the psychological needs of helpers are to be addressed. A culture of mutual support should be encouraged.
- Self-help techniques include reminding yourself that emotional reactions are normal, talking to others about feelings, and avoiding unrealistic expectations of yourself.
- Supervisory staff can play an important role in the support of helpers, providing additional guidance or information and a supportive environment.
- Peer group support can act as a formal framework within which problems and feelings can be discussed without threat. Peer group meetings require good organization, particularly with respect to information flow. Each member of the group should be allowed to contribute and receive feedback.

