

## SAMHSA's Suicide Awareness Series

### Issue #1: Preventing Compassion Fatigue

For the counselors who work in suicide crisis centers affiliated with the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), it can be hard not to be affected by serving callers so distressed they want to kill themselves.

Crisis counselors can find themselves vicariously traumatized by the stories they hear on the job. The result can be compassion fatigue.

"We hear a lot of hurting people in our jobs," said Cheryl Plotz of [Foundation 2](#). "We don't want anyone to get callous or lose the ability to be empathic, but we also don't want counselors taking that home with them every night."

Crisis call centers use several strategies to prevent problems:

- **Debrief.** "If you have a really difficult call or maybe it triggered something in your personal life, you can do a debriefing with a supervisor or talk to another clinician," said Maria Huebner, L.C.S.W., of [Behavioral Health Response](#) (BHR). That debriefing can also take place online, added BHR's Bart Andrews, Ph.D. BHR uses a Facebook-like internal social media program to create an electronic community where staff can swap coping strategies and support any time.
- **Provide training.** [Foundation 2](#) holds an annual training in which an outside expert comes in to talk about vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue and offer tips on how to avoid these occupational hazards.
- **Establish an employee assistance program.** Crisis centers often have employee assistance programs that offer short-term counseling and other services and can help employees address issues that affect both their work performance and their own well-being.
- **Encourage self-care.** "I've seen a difference when people realize, 'I need to take time to take care of me' and find ways to separate themselves when they leave here so they're not taking work home with them," said Ana Maria Lasaga, C.I.R.S., C.C.W., of [Switchboard of Miami](#). A good diet, adequate sleep, exercise, yoga, and just having fun can all help, she said. It's also important for managers to lead by example and set a cultural norm of self-care.
- **Follow up with callers.** [SAMHSA's crisis center follow-up program](#) is also helpful, said Dr. Andrews. "You're helping folks, but it's hard to see the impact in the moment," he said. "By following up, you get to hear folks say, 'This changed my life' or 'This saved my life.'"

## Resources

- [Compassion Fatigue and Satisfaction: An Overview of the Research and Practice Literature](#)
- [Working with Trauma Survivors: What Workers Need to Know](#)
- Youth Suicide Prevention and Intervention: [DRAFT Washington State Model Emotional, Behavioral and Suicide Crisis Plan, 2014](#)

#### **Related Articles**

- [Preventing Suicide: Following up After the Crisis](#)
- [Counseling on Access to Lethal Means](#)