

**BRIEF SELF-CARE CRISIS GUIDE FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS:  
KEEPING YOUR HEAD AND HEART DURING WAR AND  
OTHER LIFE-THREATENING OR ULTRA STRESSFUL CIRCUMSTANCES**

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**BABETTE ROTHSCHILD**

All helping professionals are at risk of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. However, those of you giving support to people living in or recently fled from war, genocide, or other dangerous and highly stressful world or community crises are at the greatest risk, more so for those of you who are living in the same area or under similar circumstances. You might be a counselor, therapist, medical personnel, aide-worker, or so on, living in a country at war or a community under siege for whatever reason. Or you might be helping from a physically safe distance while you worry about loved ones who are not. Be alert for symptoms such as exhaustion, numbness, anxiety, extreme emotions, loss of meaning or motivation, wanting to withdraw or disconnect, appetite or sleep changes, agitation, and so on. If any of what I describe applies to you, then I sincerely hope this *Brief Self-Care Crisis Guide* will be helpful to you! Please read on.

*Increase the potential benefits of this Guide by discussing and working with it together with one or more colleagues, in person or online. Doing so will boost your self-care with contact and support; a winning combination! Make sure to be kind, compassionate and non-judgmental with each other, acknowledging that individual needs may differ.*

***Caveat:*** Everyone’s challenges and resources are different. Please filter all advice and instructions in this guide through your own knowledge of yourself and your needs. Feel free to alter, adapt, or ignore any section, suggestion, exercise, or direction depending on what you know (or discover) is best for your mind, your body, and your spirit. And make sure to seek professional consultation with a therapist or supervisor if your symptoms persist or worsen.

### **First Things First**

Write down a list of everything you already know helps you take better care of yourself. Note which things you currently do and which you do not. Make sure to include tools and strategies you learned from your culture, family, community, religion, friends, and so on. If there are items on your list that you have neglected, forgotten, or purposely ignored, revisit them to identify which would be wise to bring back into your current self-care regime.

### **Essential Basics: Hydration, Nourishment, and Rest**

It is all too easy—and dangerous—to disregard your own basic needs in a crisis. Therefore, it is critical to remember:

**If you do not take care of yourself,  
you will not be able to sustain taking care of others.**

This is not hyperbole, it is common sense. And you hear it every time you fly in an airplane during the safety instructions:

**“Put on your own oxygen mask first before helping anyone else.”**

That is not selfish; it is necessary to protect yourself *and* to protect others. Seriously. I know this is sometimes difficult advice to follow. But if you do not, the duration of your ability to help or support anyone will be severely limited. Therefore, first and foremost, you must make sure that (as much as possible depending on your circumstances) you stay ...

- Hydrated
- Nourished
- Rested

**\*\* If it is not easy for you to remember to drink, eat, or take a break, set a timer! \*\***

Hopefully you have access to a timer or a timer app or setting on a phone, watch, or tablet. It is one of your best resources for your own self-care. Let a timer help you to remember when to take a drink, grab a meal or snack, take a power nap, or simply get up and move around. If you do not have access to a timer of some sort, consider another way to be reminded: perhaps by someone else, watching shadows move, after completing a specific number of tasks, or some such. Experiment with quantities and intervals of food, drink, and rest, to find out what is optimal for you.

- It is best for me to eat a meal or snack every \_\_\_\_\_ hours.
- I need to drink \_\_\_\_\_ cups of water and other non-caffeinated liquids daily.
- Taking a \_\_\_\_\_ minute break every \_\_\_\_\_ hours helps me stay focused.
- \_\_\_\_\_ hours of sleep per night is optimal for me.
- Taking a day off every \_\_\_\_\_ days helps me to sustain my ability to help others.

**Simple Awareness**

Taking a break to pay attention to what is happening in your body and your surroundings at that moment can be a way to quickly stabilize emotions and clear your thinking. That could involve noticing a body sensation, such as breathing, but it can also be something as simple as tasting what you are eating, looking at a cloud in the sky, listening to the sound of your neighbor’s running water, feeling the softness or hardness of the chair you are sitting upon, and so on. Taking periodic awareness breaks, even for a few seconds, can sometimes relieve a little stress.

For example:

- Wiggle your toes to feel the texture of your socks, shoes, or the surface under your bare feet
- Smell the coffee or tea in your mug
- Notice the color of a wall
- Watch a bird or insect
- Listen to the sounds made as you wash your dishes
- (If available) Taste a piece of chocolate, fruit, or a salty snack
- Stop what you are doing and take one or two breaths

What other ways might you take an awareness break? Write down a few to add to and personalize this list.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Quick Grounded Stability**

Being grounded means keeping a hold on current, present moment, reality; there are common somatic strategies that can assist you keeping that grounded hold.

For example:

- Take a walk barefooted focusing on the sensation of the floor or ground beneath you
- Tap your foot on the floor until you feel a buzzy sensation on the bottom of your foot
- Balance a pencil on two fingers. If that is too easy, balance the pencil on just one finger
- Stand on one foot for 30 seconds
- Walk an imaginary balance beam
- Wrap yourself in a thick blanket
- Sit or lay on the floor or ground

What other ways help you to feel grounded? Write down a few to add to this list, including any from your culture.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Remember Your Resources

Resources will nourish you, be they people, animals, places, spiritual practices, cultural traditions, creative and physical activities, and so on. Keep your resources with you in your mind and by carrying pictures or small objects that remind you of them. Take mini-breaks frequently to connect with one or more of your resources.

For example:

- Visit or call a member of your family or community
- Listen to or play music
- Hold your cat
- Create or participate in a cultural or spiritual activity
- Take a walk in a favorite place
- Look at a picture of a nurturing person
- Pull weeds in the garden
- Think about one or more of the values you hold most dear

List some of your resources below and add to this list as you think of others:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Distinguishing Yours and Theirs

Pay attention to how much you identify with the people you are supporting. Notice to what degree that is useful and if there is a line where identifying could be hampering your ability to support them. Recognizing your own emotions and reactions, noting whether they are the same or different, will help. However, internal language such as, "That could have been (or is like) me," "What if that happens, or happened, to my child (parent, sister, etc.?)" "How could I...if..." and so on, could risk reducing necessary clarity. Write down and rehearse sentences for internal dialogue that strike a useful balance, particularly when you are helping those who are in some of the same circumstances as you are. That will strengthen your ability to support them, as well as yourself.

Consider dialogue such as:

- "This is their time now."
- "We are (or have been) experiencing the same event(s), however as individual/different people."
- "I will take time for my own feelings later tonight *or* when I go to bed *or* when I can talk with my partner (or friend, colleague, supervisor, therapist)."

Try some of your own here:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Limit Internal Imagery

Visual and auditory images of traumatic situations that have happened to others increase your risk of vicarious trauma. If you find that continued visual and auditory images have become automatic or intrusive, you can learn to control them. Try imagining the visual images on a movie or television screen and the auditory images on a tape player in your mind, then practice manipulating the controls.

For visual images:

- Vary the size and distance of the screen
- Slow down the action and speed it up
- Change the color mix to black and white or sepia
- And so on ...

For auditory images:

- Play with the speed, slower and faster
- Alter the pitch
- Add in extra sounds that might not belong, such as a dog barking or a choir singing
- If there is talking, change the voices (to Mickey Mouse, Elmo, Darth Vader, an Opera Singer, etc.)
- And so on ...

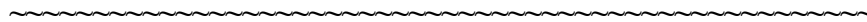
The idea is for you to learn that these are 100% your own images and you can control them rather than feeling intruded upon or victimized by them.

Note: Uncontrolled images can also be provoked by news reports, whether audio, video, or in print. You can use the same principles to take charge of those also. In addition, you might consider limiting your exposure to news if it causes ongoing difficulties for you.

### **Maintain Your Self-Care by Making a Plan**

Decide on a plan for how you will implement self-care as a part of your professional daily routine. Gather all tools that you find useful, whether learned through this guide or elsewhere, and tools you have created for yourself.

- Make a list of all the tools you know are helpful to you, including strategies, activities, exercise, supportive people, animals, nature, cultural and spiritual practices, and so on
- Rank or prioritize those that are most important or useful for you
- Take note of which ones you want to implement each day, each week, or at least one time per month
- Make sure to write your plan and keep it somewhere accessible so you can refer to it regularly
- Engage the support of a colleague to help you maintain your self-care and decide how often they will check in with you. Even better: partner with a colleague or colleague group and check in with each other to ensure you both (or all) are maintaining self-care.



### **Please share this guide:**

- You are welcome to share this guide with anyone—professional or otherwise—who might find it of use.
- You are also welcome to translate it if that would be helpful to your colleagues, so long as you maintain my bio as below and copyright as above. If you do make a translation, please send me a copy so I can pass it on if requested. My email is in my bio below.

### **Additional reading by Babette Rothschild**

Depending on your situation, one or more of these may possibly be useful:

- *Help for the Helper: Preventing Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma in an Ever-Changing World*, Updated and Expanded, 2023
- *Revolutionizing Trauma Treatment*, 2021
- *The Body Remembers*, 2000

### **Author Biography:**

*Babette Rothschild, MSW, has been a practitioner since 1976 and a teacher and trainer since 1992. She is the author of eight books (translated into more than 19 languages), all published by WW Norton, and Series Editor of the WW Norton 8 Keys to Mental Health Series. After living and working for 9 years in Copenhagen, Denmark in the 1990's she returned to her native Los Angeles. There she is writing her next books while she continues to lecture, train, and supervise professional psychotherapists worldwide. In recent years, together with members of her Somatic Trauma Therapy Team, the London office of WW Norton, and the Complex Trauma Institute, she has been active in providing pro bono training and support for thousands of psychotherapists and other helping professionals in Ukraine and other crisis areas of the world.*

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