

AIRS CONFERENCE LUNCHEON PRESENTATION

**Notes of
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You play a very important role in helping people to access resources when they may not know “where to turn” or are in a crisis situation. I will start with a couple of quotes from people who have called seeking help for their situations:

MARILYN: “The help I got when I called made all the difference for me. It put me “on the right track.”

MILDRED: “When I finally called for some help, I was exhausted and angry. I had had what felt like ‘the worst morning of my life,’ after an already difficult week. When the person I talked with just listened and then said, ‘I am really glad you called today as it sounds like you have had a hard day,’ I can’t tell you how that alone helped me.’ The day was getting better.”

GRANT: “Calling and asking for help was the hardest thing I have ever done. I’ve taken care of myself, even through tough times. That’s what I was raised to do. When I called, I felt like a failure because I could no longer care for my wife’s needs. However, the person on the telephone said some very kind words to me about having done so much to help my wife.... She applauded me for reaching out and said more people need to do just that.”

YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Your response to callers is so important! Although it’s critical to have the best information possible, and to know the resources available to callers, **equally important IS the caring and empathy** that comes across in your tone of voice and the words you say! And, this is reflected in those initial statements I just shared.

- For some people, that call is their first “reaching out” for help.... and, for those who have pride in their independence and being able to do for themselves, that first call is NOT always easy.

- For others, when making that call, they are totally overwhelmed by their situation and don't know where to begin. A few common emotions often expressed are: Depression, fear of what may happen, anger, and anxiety.
- For a person who is isolated and lonely, you may be an important "friendly person". They would talk all day with you. How you handle that call makes as much difference for that person as for the individual who is in crisis.

You may be the LIFELINE for the caller! However, always remember you are not superhuman...and you cannot solve everyone's problem. Not always easy if you tend to be a "fixer"!

The work you do can be so rewarding, especially when you know that you have helped someone by talking with them, addressing their concern or situation, or providing needed information and resources.

Yet, according to research, the work you do can be one of the toughest and most stressful of jobs. It's hard work, especially given these times where there are great needs and limited resources.

YOUR JOB IS NOT EASY

- Ever face an unending stream of telephone calls? ... feel the pressure of calls? Keep in mind, you can only work with one caller at a time.
- Ever have a caller who is angry from the start of a call and the anger is directed at you? ... A caller who starts out screaming and yelling or is super-demanding? Ever feel like you want to cut the conversation and hang up on them? (Such feelings are okay. It's what we do with those feelings that can be either good or bad!)
- Ever have people call in a panic, yet they are truly responsible for their situation? For example, they don't have the money to pay their rent this month and are in crisis.... Why no money? Because they went to Reno, and instead of "winning big" as planned, they "lost it all". One might feel like saying, "What were you thinking?" Yet, important to give the same level of respect you would give to other callers who were not responsible for their current situation...

- Ever face high expectations from callers to SOLVE their problems? ... But the resources just aren't there. How do you tell the person that they don't qualify for a service—They are 56, and the program says they have to be 60+. (**Diana** says, “When I have to say NO, I look at what else I can do to say YES. Or, I might say, “Yes, this is so unfortunate and I can see why it just does not feel right.”)
- Ever have difficulty talking with a person who has significant hearing loss or mental illness? It is so important to know what to do. For example, so often we tend to raise our voices when talking to an older person who has hearing loss. And, this only compounds the inability of the person to hear as well as possible.
- Ever have the person with mental health issues who seems to be “all over the place”?
- Ever face rudeness...insulting comments..... and perhaps even racism?

Not a matter of “if” but “who”, “when” and “how many”.

I'm sure that each of you answered YES to many of these questions! Studies show that handling stress is a top concern of call center staff. Unlike call center staff working with a business selling products, **you are dealing directly with human lives.**

When I was talking with a couple of people about this conference, they said, “How hard can it be to answer phones?” When most people think of stressful jobs, they think about firefighters, police officers, rescue workers—NOT being on the telephone.

However, listening regularly to stories of pain, fear, panic and suffering—and if you care about those who you serve—you can feel similarly. And, when we care as a helping professional, over time we can become vulnerable to compassion fatigue.

COMPASSION FATIGUE is when one's caring nature begins to erode or "whittle away" over time. Family members who provide caregiving are at risk for compassion fatigue if they don't balance the caring for others with attending to their own needs. And, this can be equally true for us in our professional roles.

- One of the best gifts we can give to the people we serve is "our caring", so it is very important to keep our caring nature intact!
- Compassion Fatigue does not develop suddenly. It is usually slow and insidious, and often we do not recognize it in ourselves until things start to become unmanageable. It takes weeks, sometimes years to surface. "It's a low level clouding of caring and concern for others. Over time, the ability to feel and care for others erodes away."
- It's important to recognize compassion fatigue, as well as burnout, in yourself and in your colleagues.

To a large degree, we need to ask ourselves: **Is my life in balance or out-of-balance? What do I do on a regular basis "to fill my cup"? to rejuvenate myself physically, emotionally and spiritually?**—which I look at as having joy! Where does your JOY come from? And do you make sure it is a part of your everyday life?

DO YOU TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF?

As important as it is to have the skills and knowledge to handle calls and help people who are in need, it's as critical to take care of yourself—your mind, body and spirit!

- Realize, too, that if you are under stress, it will likely be reflected in your tone of voice and increased rapidity of speech... and then one can begin to sound rude and impatient to the caller.
- Do you have a "care plan" for yourself, or are you at the mercy of life's ebb and flow?

We all have different signs of stress. But, do you pay attention to your earliest signs of stress... Or, not until the signs are “volcano size”? What are your “earliest warning signs” of stress?

Signs of stress can be:

Increase in pitch of voice, talking more rapidly, become more firm, for example, in exasperation say, “I just gave you that information”.

- **Cognitive:** memory problems, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, racing thoughts, difficulty making decisions and poor judgment.
- **Emotional:** Exhaustion, irritability, pessimism, frustration, feeling overwhelmed and depression
- **Physical:** headaches, backaches, indigestion, neck pain
- **Behavioral:** Changes in eating and sleeping, jaw clenching, isolating oneself, procrastinating, and substance abuse.

WHAT YOU CAN DO?

The next step in tackling stress is to identify what is causing stress for you. You have a choice—you can ignore it or fix the problem.

1). DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY!

- **Avoid internalizing a caller's anger or rudeness.** Anger may be directed at you, and the person may even say hateful words. Remember: the caller is not angry and upset at you. Often it's related to their own situation... and sometimes, even because they have had to reach out for help. Just listening and communicating an understanding often goes a long way for most people.
- It often helps to “**Put yourself into shoes of the client**”. **Sara said:** “I always remember the caller is a person...and there might be a LOT more than just concerns about housing.”
- If you **get to the problem without “fighting back”**, there is no argument to win or lose...and remember, it takes two people to argue. A person who avoids an argument always wins.

- It's also important to **realize you can't control everything**.... You also can't be SUPERMAN ...or woman...and solve everyone's problem.
- *Ellen* has a sign up in front of her cubicle as a reminder during tough calls: "I CHOOSE COMPASSION"

2). REMAIN CALM

- **Avoid raising your voice or losing control.** Arguing or raising one's voice only worsens a situation. And, when a client is escalating, remaining calm often helps to de-escalate the person/situation. **Good listening** often goes a LONG WAY with most clients.
- **Smile**--Sounds strange, but "putting a smile on your face" is actually helpful vs. rolling the eyes.
- **Have some "go to phrases"** you can draw upon. For example, Ellen told me she has at her finger tips these phrases:
 - "I can only imagine how frustrating this has been for you."
 - "I can understand why you think that..."
 - "This is really a difficult situation you are experiencing."
 - "I am really glad you called today" (want the person to feel good about having taken a step!)
- **Take a breather.** Sometimes it can be helpful, when feeling stressed and needing to re-group to say, "May I put you on hold for a few seconds"... Then take a couple of deep breaths.
- After a difficult call, **de-brief with a co-worker or supervisor.** Important not to take the stress of one call on to the next caller.

3). TAKE BREAKS

- Answering non-stop calls is sure to get you stressed. It is something I would not be able to do! Leaving the workstation for a couple of minutes, stretching, or grabbing a glass of water can make a difference. If can't get outside, can you look outside? Gives an opportunity to re-group.
 - Breaks are important regardless of work, but even more so when you have a series of unending telephone calls, and even more so, if the calls have been difficult and stressful.
- Do you stay chained to your desk at breaks and during the lunch hour? Getting away from your desk and even the building is healthy.... Take time for yourself and enjoy the break elsewhere. You become a better person for everyone—including yourself—when you take a few minutes for yourself.
 - Do whatever is good for your soul at break—go for a walk, read a chapter in a good book, listen to some music!
 - Sit back, take a deep breath. **CLOSE YOUR EYES** for 10 minutes and just rest the brain.

STRETCHING is one of the simplest stress relief methods—Walk around for a minute. Stretch from head to toe to get your blood pumping.

- How do you “refuel”, “recharge” yourself so you have positive energy in your daily life?
- Take a day off once in awhile for yourself **AND Make the Day YOURS!** This does not mean it has to be a workday. Select a day and do whatever is relaxing and “fills your personal cup”.

4). STAY HYDRATED

- Make sure you drink lots of water. Being on the telephone continuously can take a toll on you. Drinking a sufficient amount of water increases physical and mental functioning and results in higher performance.
- Avoid too much caffeine—caffeine can actually increase stress. (The 5th edition of the DSM is actually looking at a “caffeine withdrawal syndrome”) If you have many cups during a day, try to reduce consumption gradually.

5). PERSONALIZE YOUR WORK SPACE

- Make your space a “happy place” for you...a work space that is **YOURS!** — a space that is fun, comforting, or just makes you feel good. Several information and referral staff in Multnomah County had brought the outside in with plants, family photos!
- **Remember, you live in that space many hours a day—make the most of it! Surround yourself with what brings you joy and pleasure!**

6). ASK FOR AND ACCEPT HELP FROM OTHERS

- Several I & R staff at Multnomah Aging and Disability Services told me: “Once you share a difficult situation with someone else, it helps to then LET IT GO.” Don’t let “stuff rattle around in your head; it will only GROW if you do”.
- Debrief yourself regularly and have healthy support.
- Critical and supportive — Open door with supervisor and a supportive team. What is done in your work environment to build the support of the team to each other?

7). LEAVE WORK AT WORK

- At the end of the day, leave frustrations at work. Drop unresolved concerns in your garbage can or leave them at the office door. If take frustrations home from work, you will only be more stressed.
 - **Katie**: “At 5:00 I wrap up and close down the door of my office.”
 - **Diana**: “When you leave at the end of the day, don’t check work emails. The work part of the day is DONE!”
- Along with this, LEAVE HOME AT HOME. Bringing issues, frustrations and problems from home to work only compounds problems.
- **Compartmentalization** helps to keep work-related stress from spilling over into your personal life, and vice versa.
- Worrying about a client’s situation also doesn’t get you or the client anywhere. As I read a long time ago, “Worrying is like being in a rocking chair — you rock and rock but get nowhere.”
- Important to “be in the moment” at home...and at work!

8). GET ENOUGH SLEEP & REST

- Good rest and sleep rejuvenates us physically and mentally.
- What happens to you and how do you respond when you have not gotten enough sleep and rest?

9). STAY POSITIVE

- Keep an air of optimism about you. If you think or act like your job is going to be awful, it will be!
- I find that family caregivers who focus on what they have done well—rather than beating themselves up over something that did not go well—do much better! The same also applies to us as professionals in working with our clients. This makes a difference!!

There will be difficult clients, difficult situations for which there may be NO good answer BUT if you can always lend that listening ear, and the person feels that caring, YOU WILL HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE! And this is more likely to happen if you are taking care of yourself first.

On an airplane, the flight attendant says, “Put on your oxygen mask before helping others.” So be sure to have your “oxygen mask” with you!

And, what is it that provides you with “the oxygen”—the fuel, the rejuvenation—in your life?.... This is the question I will leave you with to answer for yourself...and then make it a “regular” part of your life!