

Your wellbeing when working with refugees

When you support refugees who have arrived through Community Sponsorship, there's a lot to do, and you may be assisting the family to navigate systems that you have never dealt with before. This may feel quite draining particularly in the early days of arrival. Keep in mind that you are never on your own in Community Sponsorship; if you feel that you are struggling, or you notice another Group member feeling overwhelmed, speak to your project lead. It is not a weakness to ask for help, and you are not expected to carry the weight of responsibility on your shoulders alone.

Added to the responsibility of Community Sponsorship, it may be that a member of the family you support shares part of their experiences with you or other Group members, and you may find this difficult to hear and process. This resource aims to outline how prioritising your self-care can help you to navigate this situation.

What is self-care?

Self-care means different things to different people. Putting yourself first and taking a break if needed can be easier for some people than for others. Taking time to be kind to yourself when feeling overwhelmed is important and focusing on yourself isn't selfish, it is necessary.

Self-care may simply mean taking time to watch your favourite programme with a hot drink, or having a bath when the children have gone to bed. Even a few quiet minutes on your own can help if you are looking after other family members.

Remember, as a volunteer working with refugees, you are also witnessing the ups and downs of their resettlement process which can be extremely emotional for the refugee family overall.

Why is self-care important?

Being exposed to refugees' experiences may be surprising, shocking, upsetting and at times, exhausting. As a result, it can be very easy to feel overwhelmed when exposed to the feelings of fear, loss and adjustment that many refugees experience following their resettlement to a safe country. Self-care is extremely important for both refugees **and** volunteers and it can be easy to forget to take time for yourself when so much is going on after their arrival.

Thinking about a few personal self-care options for you and your fellow Group members can be a good idea before the refugee family arrives, because it can be difficult to focus on calm, self-sustaining activities when feeling anxious, overwhelmed or tired.

Self-care is critical when supporting traumatised individuals. It is important to remember that traumatic events experienced by others can sometimes leave its mark on Community Sponsorship volunteers or those close to them in other ways (teachers, social workers etc.) and is often referred to as 'secondary trauma' or 'compassion fatigue.'

Finding yourself feeling overwhelmed because of all the tasks involved in supporting refugees, or when hearing about a traumatic event from the refugees themselves or during a meeting, or even after reading information about their background are all secondary trauma reactions. It is important to understand that these reactions are normal and understandable but that their effects can be reduced by the following:

- Firstly, and most importantly, you are never alone as a volunteer in a Community Sponsorship Group. It is important to be able to talk about your feelings together but also not to share information entrusted to you (unless it is a safeguarding concern). You can also get in [contact with Reset](#) if you feel you need to speak with someone outside your group.
- Is there a specific person that you can communicate with regularly? Putting this in place before the family arrives and having a consistent named person to contact can really help.

- When listening to emotionally charged topics, it can be very easy to find that time has flown by and you may feel exhausted and upset as a result. Not knowing how to end the discussion or having to get on with your daily life after hearing upsetting and possibly traumatic information can also be a challenge.
- Limiting conversations of this type to a shorter period of time, asking if the topic could be continued after a break, or arranging to speak again at an agreed time are good places to start.
- If these feelings continue over time, then compassion fatigue can occur. Setting limits whilst being exposed to highly emotional charged information can be a proactive step forward in this instance. Contacting or making referrals to mental health professionals or related agencies are good starting points as they are trained to support traumatised individuals.
- Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue can also result in feelings of overwhelming physical tiredness or exhaustion. If possible, listen to what your body is telling you - a good night's sleep is often the best way to process the details of what you have been told or been exposed to.

What are the best ways to take care of myself if I feel burnt out?

Taking care of yourself is something that may sound straightforward but here are some practical suggestions:

- Talking helps - but don't relay details as this may increase your feelings and impact others, as well as sharing information the family member you have heard from might not want to be shared. Emotions can run high and this is where speaking with someone who knows about the situation can help. Getting upset or angry can be a normal part of adjustment but it is also good to address these feelings in order to reduce the chance of issues escalating over time.

- Go to bed early if possible. If it isn't, try to arrange a time when you can have some quiet space (even if it's sitting in the garden with a cup of tea). This will help you feel more in control as even a short break will help.
- Sleep is essential as deeper, (REM) sleep will help your brain process the emotional/difficult/shocking information it has been exposed to.
- Continue to eat regularly and try not to skip meals. Low blood sugar will also increase anxiety.
- Limit device use at least an hour before bedtime. This is because the blue screen suppresses melatonin production which can result in difficulty sleeping.
- Go outside - connection to nature can help. Be mindful of where you would feel safe outside and go to a place that is familiar to you.
- Your trauma history can play a part. If you have experienced a recent loss, or if you have been traumatised in the past, take extra time and care with yourself. If it is close to a painful or emotional anniversary, then also bear this in mind.
- If the images, feelings or sleep issues persist for longer than two weeks contact your GP.

In today's world, being in a position to play a part in the life-changing resettlement of a refugee family is an incredible thing to be a part of. As a Community Sponsorship Group you have the opportunity to support families, and to learn as much as possible from them in order to strengthen and develop multi-cultural connections which can benefit everyone. This may mean that you hear traumatic or upsetting experiences, however, trauma is part of life and learning how to navigate this can result in transformation and growth for everyone involved.