

We are already helping but we are exhausted!

OR We want to help but what happens in a few months when we are exhausted?

Helping others can be a costly business. As Christians we are called to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). We tend to interpret that as sacrificing our own needs to those of others. We ignore the second half of that sentence “as yourself” because the word ‘love’ is assumed. The assumption built in is that we love ourselves. When you take a plane journey, the stewards demonstrate the safety code which includes the following: “In the event of a loss of oxygen, oxygen masks will drop down. The passenger should always fit his or her own mask before helping others requiring assistance”. The principle is good – to take care of others you have to take care of yourself.

Self-Care

What does the Bible have to say about Self-Care?

- Jesus’ example. On more than one occasion, Jesus withdrew to a quiet place after ministering to many people. He knew he needed to recharge his batteries, spiritually, physically and emotionally (Mark 6:1; 9:30; John 6:18)
- God’s ministry. The God of compassion who comforts us (2Corinthians 1:3-4). The story of Elijah (1 Kings 19)
- The Holy Spirit. We are reminded that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and as such it is our duty to care for them. (1 Corinthians 3:17)

We need to know and rely on our identity in Christ. So often we think we need to achieve in order to please God. Ephesians 1:12 says we are “to BE for the praise of his glory” not “to do”. Staying healthy in ministry and sustaining ministry begins with a right sense of our identity in Christ and taking care of our own needs.

To help ourselves, each other and refugee communities, we have to understand a number of things.

What is stress?

Stress is a force or pressure. In materials it causes metals to bend, change their shape. In humans it is a natural response to new situations. It causes us to respond to the pressure, to adapt, to anticipate problems. It teaches us to cope with trying conditions while remaining effective. Good stress is useful – it helps you get up in the mornings!

Acute stress when we experience too many demands, too many stressful experiences, and can lead to destructive symptoms, depression, exhaustion and burnout. Overload may be felt gradually but is predictable.

Why do we get stressed helping refugees?

- We are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and the lack of immediate solutions
- There are inadequate financial resources
- We hear too many stories of atrocities, violence and trauma. We take them to heart and end up being traumatised ourselves
- We deplete our resources by being constantly available to meet the need. We think we are indispensable

- We are trying to handle too many roles – working by day, volunteering by night
- We lose perspective, a sense of balance and of connection to people and sometimes to God

How do we recognise stress?

- Before entering into stressful situations, it is helpful to know your usual symptoms of stress – physical (e.g. sleeplessness, loss of appetite), emotional (excessive weeping, irritability, anger) and behavioural(e.g. withdrawal, addictions, inability to make decisions)
- Talk to someone you trust, whom you trust when you feel under pressure. They will feed back on your behaviour

What can we do to prevent stress?

- Take good care of yourself physically – healthy eating, sleeping, exercise. Create exercise opportunities if the physical environment is harsh.
- Talk to people, build a network of supportive relationships
- Set boundaries – learn to say “no”
- Have training on what to expect in the work

What is compassion fatigue?

The disturbing and stressful behaviours and emotions experienced by a helper of victims. They result from being exposed to the verbal details of the traumatic event. They lead to fatigue, weariness and some of the signs that trauma victims themselves experience.

How can pastors or organisations help?

- Train volunteers in self-care as well as refugee-care
- Control the schedule – insist on time off and model it themselves
- Train teams in listening skills and encourage them to listen to each other
- Remind them regularly of their identity in Christ
- Encourage support social networks outside of the work
- Have training themselves on staff care and specialist skills such as Critical Incident debriefing

“We are not stressed yet. But we are worried about getting deeper into refugee ministry than we can handle and so could end up in trouble.”

The fact that you have realised the danger is a good foundation for making sure this does not happen. Decide prayerfully and carefully what you can commit to doing and what you cannot do. The needs may be huge but give these needs to God for you cannot help everyone. He sees every individual and is responsible for each one. We are not. If you are reaching out to refugees on top of your normal commitments, inevitably your time is limited. Be careful not to overburden others (your fellow church members or your family) because of the commitments you accept but which will involve them.

Never feel that the contribution you can give is too small. The Lord has prepared good works for you to do (Ephesians 2:10). Do not do what He has prepared for others to do.