



# Stressed Out?



***As you release all physical effort & quiet your thoughts, your body gets a rare opportunity to rest completely, rejuvenate, renew, let go, heal and grow.***

***Take a deep breath and exhale ... there is no time like now ...***

## What is Volunteer Burn-Out

Many expressions have been cleverly coined for volunteer burn-out:

- ☹ Fried / Toasted / Crackers / Emotionally Drained
- ☹ In a Fog / Zoned Out / Zombie
- ☹ Compassion or Empathy Fatigue

There are many kinds of burn-out caused by various environmental and life circumstances. Each individual person and pet deals with stress in their own unique way. However, there are common symptoms like freezing, flight and fight that are species inclusive. Sometimes, we simply shut-down.

Burn-out is when one functions without mindfulness. Total burn-out is when one isn't capable of functioning at all, like being awake, but unconscious at the same time. One goes into overdrive and automatic control. It is that place where mind and body no longer meet. We lose harmony and balance in our lives. We are on a hamster wheel, mechanically going in circles, without feeling joy or accomplishment!

Compassion and empathy fatigue appropriately fits what may happen to the heart-centered volunteers (R.E.A.D. teams, Pet Partners, others). Whatever we call it,

**BURN-OUT IS A REACTION TO UNRELIEVED, CONSISTENT, DRAINING; SAPPING CLUSTERS OF EMOTIONAL AND/OR PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION.**

The impact of dealing with emotional stress has been recognized by medical professionals for over 150 years. The internet, TV, magazines and health care professionals make a fortune (not to mention pharmaceutical companies) on recommending numerous medications and techniques for relieving stress. They may help, but behavioral change needs to accompany this process for long-term relief.

When stress is not addressed it can wreak havoc on well-being, causing illness and an overall sense of fear that things just aren't "okay". Triggers are everywhere. At times, a dog sniffing the garbage or a child dropping some milk is enough to send us to the moon. **Oftentimes, burn-out is why we stop doing what we are passionate about.**

The CORE of any non-profit organization (and for profit too) is the VOLUNTEERS (or employees), who need to be healthy in mind and body. We can help ourselves with awareness, education (of self and pets) and preventive maintenance.

### Some Symptoms of Stress include, but are not limited too:

1. Decreased ability to discuss and/or process feelings
2. Complaints about headaches, exhaustion, or losing sleep
3. Over-reaction to frustrating situations or obstacles (conflict)
4. Mood swings (depression / anxiety)
5. Expressing feelings of powerlessness ineffectiveness and guilt
6. Decreasing work (volunteer or other) performance and isolation
7. A general appearance of lack of focus, disorientation, or apathy (including pets)

### Why is Burn-Out/Stress Such an Intrinsic Part of Volunteering?

One answer is that humans are what naturalists call "bonding animals." We look to each other for meaning and position. We naturally relate and empathize with those who turn to us for help or guidance. We want to make a difference, leave a legacy behind, and give something back. It makes us feel good and important.

Volunteers usually don't get paid in what society deems "payment for services", that is MONEY. We get payment in many other ways that are enriching. However, try explaining to someone who is not aware of volunteering, that a certain percentage (for some 100%) of your job is volunteering and notice the response. You can get these strange, sometimes sympathetic (get a life) looks, and want to respond with a "hey, I'm choosing to do this and it feels good, you ought to try it, you anal ... well, never mind." Part of handling stress is learning when, where and how to respond. Who to waste our energy on! When to say, "aha, interesting, all is well, and walk away."

### Beyond the Training Manuals and Workshops

The professional volunteer teams need to train, study, test and acquaint themselves often with recognizing stress in themselves, pets and volunteers. BEYOND THE TRAINING MANUALS AND WORKSHOPS, volunteer teams need:

- 🕒 Continuing education (tools and resources)
- 🕒 Learn when to be flexible, clarify, make adjustments, set boundaries
- 🕒 Politely say "no" and/or negotiate a compromise
- 🕒 Recognize time for personal renewal (for pets too)
- 🕒 Learn how to press the "Pause" button
- 🕒 Seek and/or create a network with common-minded people to process issues w/o judgment and one-upmanship



Hit the Paws Button ~

## Recognizing Unhealthy Stress!

**Healthy stress** is an inevitable part of living. The only way to avoid it completely is to stop breathing, not such a good alternative! Breathing however is a good way to manage stress. Healthy stress stimulates our endorphins and adrenaline. Oftentimes, stress helps us “get our butts moving *and the job done.*”

**Unhealthy stress** is a chain reaction that comes in clusters without relief. It is relentless. It is a chain of life-draining incidents one-after-another. Ever have one of those days? Well, if it turns into “one of those years”, it is time to take-a-breather. Stress hurts us when we do not know how to manage it well. We go on automatic control (automatons). Oftentimes, we lose our intuitive ability to know when to say “no”, set boundaries and take time for personal renewal (see Mary Oliver’s Poem, The Journey). Occasionally, we can’t say no because life circumstances (sick family members, pets) almost makes it impossible. Learning to recognize signs and asking for help are essential for coping and survival.

How many people are reluctant or unable to communicate what they need in time of stress?

*Not communicating one's feelings and needs effectively is a symptom of that very stress.*

When the pressure builds too high, individuals react in a number of ways. They may doggedly try to carry on with work, suffering the emotional and physical consequences (illness). They might collapse, becoming frozen and unable to act (vaporize or deer-in-headlights). They might “disappear”. Running away can be a coping mechanism.

The vanishing volunteer (simply packs up and leaves) and can turn emotion into anger as well as blaming the group and charitable work altogether. Clearly the damage resulting from any of these reactions to pressure and stress is something we want to avoid for the individual's and the program's growth. Being pro-active, recognizing when it time’s to take a breath and break, and recognizing the same in our pets, are keys to deflecting knee-jerk, debilitating reactions.

## Preparing Volunteers for Stress

When teams visit facilities, the implicit assumption is that the person or groups being visited are more vulnerable. The visiting person sees herself as being whole and able to cope. Nevertheless, as many of us have experienced, both are emotionally subject to having stress seep in, especially over a long period.

There are a number of ways a manager of volunteer resources can work with volunteers to help them prepare for and recognize stress from empathy fatigue. **Actively listen** for a certain period (don’t want to stress yourself out, that’s not good role-modeling). Never hesitate to refer volunteers back to their training manuals (Pet Partners, R.E.A.D., other)

or any books that will help them deal with stress for themselves and their partners (pets).

Other ways to prepare volunteers for stress are:

1. Giving people permission to safely respond to and share, their emotions like sadness, frustration and anxiety. People feel better when they know they aren't alone.
2. Teach stress relief strategies at your volunteer training sessions. Preface any such teaching with a clear acknowledgement that *everyone* is appreciated. Emotional reactions, such as grieving, sadness, anger or fear are normal and should be acknowledged. This awareness, and feeling connected, can actually prevent the emotions from gaining control of us.
3. Help volunteers to focus on abilities, strengths and accomplishments rather than disabilities, fears and failure.
4. While remembering that different people respond to stress in different ways, provide resources for your volunteers for coping with stress. These can be everything from printed materials on relaxation techniques to permission to take breaks from assignments.
5. Provide an outlet for support and/or coaching sessions for volunteers, giving opportunities to share, relax and socialize with other volunteers and have fun. *We have scheduled sessions where we invite Dog Teams in to play or relax with their dogs (dog sports or yoga doga).. We ALWAYS integrate play in between training sessions.*

## Dealing with Stress When it Occurs

**Open, but focused communications.** Showing concern will ease some of the loneliness most people feel when under extraordinary stress. Give volunteers permission to express their feelings without judgment or trying to FIX THEM.

**Listen** empathetically and respond with acceptance and understanding. No need to “own” or “take responsibility” for their feelings. Providing the opportunity, environment and tools for healing is all you need to do!

**Encourage** stressed volunteers to take a step back from their work and focus on their daily lives, relationships and activities. Lack of balance in one's life is one of the greatest threats to ineffective volunteering.

**Motivate** volunteers to keep up their physical stamina with regular healthy meals, drinking plenty of water, exercise, and relaxation and be mindful of the same with pets.

**Noticing and acknowledging** when volunteers need time to grieve (cope with loss of a client, pet, other) is a gift beyond words. Ask them: “How can we help”?

**Yoga and Meditation:** Offer and/or recommend Yoga and Meditation Sessions (see hand-outs) as ways to balance mind and body, relieve tensions and tune-in to the present moment (like our dogs)!

**Perform an activity that is physiologically incompatible with stress (counter-conditioning):** Lock yourself in your office, room or closet for 5 minutes and sing, dance or do something silly like LAUGH. Choose to sit and be silent. This will give you a short respite from the emotional and physiological effects of stress.

**Choose where your energy will go!** Everything in life is a lesson. We can choose where to focus our energy (positive/negative), when and for how long.

**10-10-10:** Ask yourself; will this matter 10 minutes, 10 weeks, 10 years from now?

## Cultural Considerations

Be mindful, that men and women express their feelings differently, as do children, teens, adults and older adults. People rooted in distinct cultures such as ethnic or religious traditions, regional and other community cultures, such as the gay/lesbian community, may have their own systems of support. Do not assume anything when you encounter cultural differences in reactions to stress, as it may easily add to the pressure on the volunteer. Just observe, listen and learn. Ask, "How can I help?"

**Finally, take care of you.** You cannot effectively help your volunteers deal with empathy fatigue if you yourself are overwhelmed with it.

## Careful Humor can Gently Lighten most Situations

### You know you're STRESSED OUT when:

- Relatives that have been dead for years come visit & suggest that you get some sleep.
- You can achieve a Runner's High by sitting up.
- You say the same sentence repeatedly, not realizing you've said it before.
- You say the same sentence repeatedly, not realizing you've said it before.
- The Sun is too loud.
- Trees begin threatening you.
- You can see individual air molecules vibrating.
- You explore the possibility of setting up an IV drip of espresso.
- You wonder if brewing is an essential step in the consumption of coffee.
- Things become "Very Clear" and you feel "Very Enlightened".
- You begin speaking in a language that only you and Channelers can understand.
- You believe that if you think hard enough, you can levitate.
- You and Reality file for divorce.
- It appears that people are speaking to you in binary code.

- You have great revelations concerning Life, the Universe, and Everything else, but can't quite find the words for them before the white glow fades, leaving you more confused than before.
- Antacid tablets and No-Doze become your sole source of nutrition.
- You begin to talk to yourself, then disagree about the subject, get into a nasty row about it, lose, and refuse to talk to yourself for the rest of the day.
- You yell: "STOP TOUCHING ME!" even though you're the only person in the room.
- You say the same sentence repeatedly, not realizing you've said it before.
- You can spell "Baccalaureate".
- You go to bed at 3AM and think, "Oh, it's an early night!"
- Social life? Sex life? What's that?
- You talk to yourself in the 3rd person.
- You don't drink, but you find it a convenient way to explain how you dressed yourself in the morning.

## References and Helpful Links

There are numerous resources on stress management, non-profits and volunteer burn-out on the web. Here are several that will help you get started:

- 🕒 [www.CharityChannel.com](http://www.CharityChannel.com) *Volunteer Management Review: Avoiding -- or Surviving -- Burnout, Preventing Volunteer Burnout Emergency Mental Health and Traumatic Stress, Who's at risk for burnout?, Preventing Volunteer Burnout, Burnout Signs, Symptoms and Prevention, Preventing Stress*
- 🕒 [www.newenglandpetpartners.org](http://www.newenglandpetpartners.org)
- 🕒 [www.volunteerpower.com](http://www.volunteerpower.com) FREE: Volunteer Power Monthly Newsletter!
- 🕒 [www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)
- 🕒 [www.compasspoint.com](http://www.compasspoint.com) (for non-profits) / [www.boardcafe.com](http://www.boardcafe.com)
- 🕒 [www.wellnessreproductions.com](http://www.wellnessreproductions.com) / (Non-profit website within your State)

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### The Journey by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,  
 Though the voices around you  
 Kept shouting their bad advice –  
 though the whole house began to tremble  
 and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
 “Mend my life!” each voice cried.  
 But you didn’t stop.  
 you knew what you had to do,  
 though the wind pried with its stiff fingers  
 at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible.  
 it was already late enough and a wild night,  
 and the road full of fallen branches and stones.  
 But little by little, as you left their voices behind,  
 the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,  
 and there was a new voice which you slowly  
 recognized as you own, that kept you company  
 as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,  
 determined to do the only thing you could do –  
 determined to save the only life that you could save.