

## Who Takes Care of Us?

I was going to write about treadmill workstations this time around.

I changed my mind!

Before I came into emergency dispatch as a career I assumed most people who went into Dispatch did it intentionally. I've been around just long enough and read enough now to know that there are also folks "happened" to get a job dispatching. Thing is, no matter how we got here, it appears those of us who stay wouldn't choose any other job.

I suspect it's because we're chronic caregivers. What other reason would keep someone coming back day after day to talk a distressed parent down enough so they could coach them to give their toddler CPR, doggedly help locate a frightened caller despite a significant language barrier, or stay on the line with a person in respiratory distress and listen as the caller took their dying breaths while waiting for responders to arrive? While at the same time understanding that responder safety is also Mission One and living as best we can by "Everyone goes home at the end of the day"?

And then WE go home. To partners, children, pets, households that need running, elderly relatives who want independence but need some serious care. I recently asked a new coworker how he was doing sleeping during the day and he said, " Fine. I go down to the basement where it's quiet and my wife runs everything so, no problem. How about you?" I said, "I AM the wife!" We laughed about that.

My point here is: Who takes care of us? I know...you're getting ready to scream if I say, "make time for yourself." I'm right there with ya...if I screamed every time someone said that to me? I'd have been someone else's IEA by now!

But be honest. Aren't the people around you accustomed to you being the one who takes care of it all? Because you truly can give and are OK doing it? Because you're a problem solver who can prioritize and organize and get.it.done like nobody's business? So it really often does come down to our having to care for ourselves. Hang in with me here... 'cause I know you're thinking, "who has time for that," and/or, "well, that's just selfish."

Here's why you need to try. In a study of a little over 200 [predominantly female] emergency dispatchers done by the University of Central Florida in conjunction with the International Academy of Emergency Dispatch, participants answered items in the Stanford Acute Stress Reactions Questionnaire. The answers they gave indicated 17% of the participants showed symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder related to a call they had answered within the 30 days before taking the questionnaire. This result was significantly higher than in what researchers called the "normed" population. And that rates of Secondary Trauma Stress (STS--the stress related to being exposed to a traumatic incident) were also significantly higher than the "normed" population.

None of these results took me by surprise. Nor did this, and I'm quoting:

"Adding nuance to our initial understanding of the role of stress in this population, our study also found a higher rate of Compassion Satisfaction (CS) that was unrelated to Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) symptoms indicating that despite these stressful conditions, dispatchers find their role as helpers to be personally rewarding."

And there you have it. We truly are chronic caregivers.

(You can read an article about this...and related studies

here: <http://www.iaedjournal.org/content/results-support-previous-findings> )

Or better yet, get your hands on a copy of the March/April 2015 " Journal of Emergency Dispatch" and read the entire study yourself.

So, how are you going to do it? Take care of yourself, or soothe yourself? Listen, if you're suffering symptoms of ASD or STS, get HELP! There are professional resources out there and Critical Incident Stress Management groups can be a place to start. And, please, don't hesitate to check in with your doc for a referral if you need a pro to give you a hand working through some things.

If you just need a quiet boost, then check out one of my favorite resources for self-care. Susan Albers's book, "50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food," gives you fifty ideas of how to soothe yourself...which I equate with taking care of yourself. And many of them can be done in the commercial break of whatever TV show is your favorite. Or when, despite however many channels, there's nothing on!

Sure, grabbing chips or chocolate or crusty French bread with butter is fast and waaay too easy. But try the tip about cocooning. Wrapping yourself up in a soft fleece blanket is just as fast and feeling how cozy it is works wonders. And worth its weight in entertainment value to see how fast your cats, if you have them, come out of the woodwork to camp out on you. I'm already pretty well upholstered but there's something about adding the blanket that makes them want to hunker down, get comfy, and purr on me. And I consider the purr therapy a bonus.

Or try adding a couple of drops of lavender essential oil to your CPAP reservoir, if you have one, to help relax you into restful sleep. Or your favorite scent in a diffuser in your bedroom or somewhere near your favorite chair. Or schedule a massage or Reiki session for some healing touch. If this is too big a chunk of time in your schedule, maybe try a foot reflexology session or hand massage to start, just so you know how rejuvenating it can be.

Starting with small changes builds sustainability. Look for the small spaces of time that already exist instead of "making time" because we all know that almost never happens. Once you learn which coping/soothing strategies work best for you in the small bits of time you have, you can figure out other spaces to fit them in.

And as you feel cared for, maybe even refreshed...recharged...you can come to see that taking care of

yourself isn't selfish at all. It allows you to do what you need and want to do in your heart:  
Give care and help and comfort to the people who need it while you're working ...and be able to  
continue providing the same for your loved ones, too.