

Care for the carer: self-care

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Case

Patrick works with asylum seekers. The ex-globetrotter started the job with plenty of enthusiasm and culturally sensitive openness. But nowadays Patrick is reluctant to go to work. He does not agree with a number of changes which have been introduced by the management. He also doesn't feel comfortable with his colleagues. But the last straw for him is an immense sense of disappointment because he feels like he is being used by a client.

General

Working with refugees and asylum seekers is extremely interesting. However, working with people who have experienced the most terrible things, who are going through a very difficult period, who feel helpless, also carries considerable risk for the support worker. Some take this feeling of hopelessness home with them, others are endlessly committed, only to crash later down the line. Cynicism and numbing are perhaps even worse consequences.

These tips can help you as a support worker in giving guidance to those you work with:

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust
2. Restore calm
3. Advise and refer
4. Create a sense of solidarity
5. Provide hope and future perspective

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust (for yourself)

- Of course, your work must be physically safe, but it is also important that feel safe in the work you're doing.
- Search for concrete answers to the following questions:
 - Is my job clear? Can I describe my job in two lines?
 - Are the restrictions of my job clear?
 - Where can I turn to if something goes wrong?
 - How can I recognise that I am overstepping my own boundaries?
- Always work in an ethical manner. You put yourself and your colleagues at risk if you go beyond the boundaries of your job. Are you in doubt as to whether what you're doing is sensible? Ask yourself the following questions:
 - Can I talk to a colleague about what I'm doing? To my partner?
 - Imagine that my actions appear in the media - would this put my organisation's reputation at risk?

2. Restore calm (for yourself)

- Document your work, monitor your own boundaries. Without a sufficient level of mental calm, you cannot take a step back and think clearly.

- So, search for concrete answers to the following questions:
 - How do I recognise stress signals in myself? What do I do when I recognise them?
 - Do I have enough time to do my job? If not, reformulate your task/job.
 - What helps me calm down?

3. Advise and refer (for yourself)

- The golden rule of this work is: avoid a feeling of powerlessness.
- So, search for concrete answers to the following questions:
 - Do I have the right resources to do my job?
No?
 - Determine what is missing and ask for more resources.
 - Adjust your own goals or tasks.
 - Do I have the right knowledge to do my job?
No? Then you have to read up and acquire information, or reassess your job.
- To avoid a feeling of powerlessness: ensure that you always follow more than one strategy to reach a goal.

4. Create a sense of solidarity (for yourself)

- Helping people is not something you ever do alone. Avoid alienating yourself from your colleagues and clients.
- Solidarity with the workplace and colleagues:
 - Help to ensure a good working environment.
 - Network with colleagues outside of the organisation.
- Solidarity with the client:
 - Engage in the support you provide, without taking on the sense of hopelessness felt by the client.
- Recognise when you are becoming isolated: Important alarm signals:
 - Your client tells you: "You're the only one who wants to help me".
 - When you feel like you don't know who you can talk to about a difficult situation.

5. Provide hope and perspective for the future (to yourself)

- By definition, working with refugees and asylum seekers means working with a sense of hope.
- Your engagement are grains of hope within a much bigger picture, One intervention of one person can mean a shift in someone's personal narrative.
- Aim for modest but enthusiastically sustained ambition.

Adapted to the case

Patrick works with asylum seekers. The ex-globetrotter started the job with plenty of enthusiasm and culturally sensitive openness. He wanted to make a difference. But nowadays Patrick is reluctant to go to work. He does not agree with a number of changes which have been introduced by the management. He also doesn't feel comfortable with his colleagues. But the last straw for him is an immense sense of disappointment because he feels like he is being used by a client.

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust

- Patrick does not feel comfortable with his colleagues, he doesn't agree with some changes that have been introduced and feels "used" by a client.
- Patrick's physical safety is never in danger, but his psychological safety is.
- If Patrick wants to continue with his work, he has to look at his task and the content of his job in detail with his management.

2. Restore calm

- Hopelessness and resignation indicate stress and frustration.
- Patrick must have sufficient space to air his grievances in a meeting.
- Let him talk about his initial motivation and what is now standing in the way of that.

3. Advise and refer

- What can and must happen?
- What is standing in the way?

4. Create a sense of solidarity

- Can Patrick's situation be discussed in a team setting? Is he the only one having such thoughts? A good discussion seems necessary.
- Can Patrick turn to anyone else? Colleagues or his supervisor?

5. Future perspective

- What does Patrick expect from his job? Has anything been put in motion higher up in the organisation to ensure that things improve in the near future?

Want to read more?

Managing stress in humanitarian workers, Guidelines for good practice
www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/Health/managing-stress-en.pdf