

**Stressors for Lay Counsellors**

Difficult or Very Distressed Clients

People can have many different reactions to stressful events. As a lay counsellor, you may encounter people who are very emotionally upset, crying or in shock, or people who feel frustrated or angry by events that have happened or because they feel they can’t get the help they need. In addition, you may encounter people who may be a risk to themselves (i.e. suicidal) or to others. All of these situations can be stressful for you as a lay counsellor. You may feel unsafe with the client or unsure how to help best.

Encountering or Hearing Stories of Serious Loss or Death

Depending on the type of work you do as a lay counsellor, you may hear very sad stories of loss, serious injury or death. If you work in crisis situations, you may also directly witness serious injury or death in your helping role. In some cases, you may encounter people who have been threatened or injured by violent acts. Having feelings about the stories you hear of other people’s pain, fear and grief is normal and very human. You may also feel angry when hearing about people who have been harmed or victimised by others. Such events can cause us to question the nature of man or God, or to take on a negative view of the world. Sometimes, someone’s story will also touch experiences in your own life, intensifying the feelings and reactions you may show.

Having Unrealistic Expectations of Oneself

Helpers sometimes have unrealistic expectations about being able to assist people with multiple or serious problems or about having “all the answers.” Lay counsellors may feel helpless or guilty when they are not able to assist someone in a very difficult situation. It is easy to forget that being warm and compassionate toward someone in distress is already a big help, even if you cannot address all of their problems. In addition, when working with people who have been through very distressing events, lay counsellors may feel their own problems seem small and don’t deserve attention. They may not feel that it is all right to pay attention to their own needs, and so neglect their feelings and need for rest or support.

Job and Team Stress

Contrary to popular belief, it is often not the story or encounter with loss or a terrible event that causes the most stress for lay counsellors and other helpers. More often, difficult working conditions or certain stresses from the job are the biggest source of stress for helpers. This can include working long hours under difficult conditions, unclear boundaries for work, lack of a clear job description, uncertainty about one’s role, conflict among team members, poor communication with team members or supervisors or feeling unsupported in one’s work. When working in very difficult settings or with people in serious distress, it is easy for job stresses to pile up on individuals and on the team. Team members may become less efficient or effective, may develop negative attitudes about the work, organisation or sometimes clients and may withdraw from the group or become short-tempered.