
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE HOLIDAYS: PROMOTING WELLNESS AND MANAGING STRESS**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE**

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With the holiday season fast approaching, questions may arise about how to promote wellness and manage stress within domestic violence programs. The guidance that follows was developed by the NRCDDV's Capacity Building and Education Team and the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health.

For the past few years, the NRCDDV has released **Technical Assistance (TA) Guidance** to the field in preparation for the holidays, defined here as the time period beginning the week of Thanksgiving through Three King's Day (January 6th). Although there continues to be a common perception that domestic violence increases during the holidays, available research on such a link is still limited and inconclusive. Information on the number of calls received by the **National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH)**¹ for the past ten years indicates that the number of calls drops dramatically during the holidays, including on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day (see **Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline** on page 8 for additional information).

In 2011, the NRCDDV released **TA Guidance** (http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/TAGuidance-DVHolidays2011.pdf) exploring the prevalence of domestic violence during the holidays, finding no evidence suggesting an increase. Whether or not domestic violence programs experience any shifts in the number of survivors accessing services during the holidays, it is likely that there will be particular opportunities and challenges to be considered by advocates as they provide services to survivors and their families during this time. Work stress, burnout, secondary trauma, and even job dissatisfaction are not problems unique to victim advocates or the holiday season. However, empirical evidence suggests that these issues may manifest during the holidays and present a challenge to domestic violence programs. Without a proper understanding of the value of wellness promotion and stress management, many programs may not provide the adequate attention and support that shelter staff need during high stress times.

This year's Technical Assistance Guidance is intended to help domestic violence programs create the organizational support needed to better respond to the wellness needs of shelter staff during the holiday season.

SHELTER LIFE DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Research suggests that people in the United States are more likely to feel their stress increase rather than decrease during the holidays. In addition, holiday stress seems to have a particular impact on women, who take charge of many of the holiday celebrations, particularly the tasks related to preparing meals and decorating the home (**Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 2006**). While for some, the holiday season may bring the benefit of time off from work, research suggests that workplace stressors do not necessarily disappear during this time of the year. People may worry about their work responsibilities interfering with the quantity and quality of time off with their families (**Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 2006**).

¹ NDVH call data reflect individuals reaching out on a toll-free helpline for assistance, including victims, friends and family, and less frequently, offenders.

Throughout the year, while other organizations close to observe different holidays, domestic violence and sexual assault programs continue to operate without any interruption in services. Advocates who provide essential services (hotline workers, safe house staff, counselors and hospital respondents, for example) are required to cover around the clock shifts – 7 days a week, 365 days a year – to provide the necessary services that a survivor may need at any given time. For these advocates, spending the holidays at work – work that involves witnessing the impact of trauma on survivors of abuse – can take a toll on their emotional wellbeing. During the holidays, advocates may have to manage secondary trauma in addition to everyday stressors such as project deadlines, heavy workloads and juggling personal and professional life. They also have to deal with the added stress that holidays can bring, including navigating family dynamics or demands and expectations, managing guests or travel, meeting faith-based expectations or responsibilities unique to the holidays, and being impacted by the commercialism of the season and the cultural pressure of high consumerism.

There are several common causes of excessive workplace stress that can affect shelter staff during the holidays. Examples of these sources of stress are discussed below.

- Shelter staff may be required to work extra hours to make sure that there is sufficient coverage due to non-essential staff taking time off, thereby limiting the amount of time essential staff may spend with family and friends.
- During the holidays, there are additional staff duties related to accepting and sorting an increase in donations, securing and wrapping gifts for survivors and their children, managing the additional number of volunteers that donate their time during this season, community events, and end-of-year program-related reporting. See the [2012 TA Guidance, What's Cooking?](http://vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRC DV_TAG-DV Holidays2012.pdf) (http://vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRC DV_TAG-DV Holidays2012.pdf) for recommendations on managing the surplus of holiday food donations.
- Assuming that all employees observe the same holidays can become a source of frustration for those staff that are not part of the mainstream culture. The holidays can mean different things for different people. While many may celebrate Christmas, Hanukah, Kwanzaa, or Winter Solstice, some do not observe any holiday at all. Different cultures celebrate holidays differently, and having to be in charge of planning holiday-specific events that are not part of their own culture may heighten stress or anxiety for staff. The [2013 TA Guidance](http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRC DV_TAG-DV Holidays2013.pdf) (http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRC DV_TAG-DV Holidays2013.pdf) reviews cultural sensitivity issues to consider as programs work with survivors and their families during the holiday season.
- Some advocates may feel pressured to meet the needs of all residents who may celebrate differently or want to observe different cultural and religious traditions during this time.
- Staff may experience feelings of anxiety due to inclement weather, including having to deal with possible weather-related emergencies. Some advocates find themselves snowed in during storms or having to deal with structural damage (frozen pipes, caved roofs, fallen trees or flooded basements), and often this comes with a loss of utility services (heat, electricity, phones, or drinkable water) that can be particularly stressful to resolve and cause tension and discomfort in the shelter.
- For shelter staff working overnight, particularly during the holidays when family and loved ones are gathering together to connect, celebrate, and participate in family traditions together, a sense of loneliness, isolation and being cut off from their families and friends can be an issue that leads to job dissatisfaction and ultimately stress.

- A survey conducted in 2008 found that the average starting salary of a full-time, salaried front-line advocate was \$24,765 ([National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2009](#)). Another study in 2010, based on salary figures from 66 domestic violence programs across the country, estimated the average starting annual salary of a full-time advocate to be \$28,976 ([Lyon, Bradshaw & Menard, 2011](#)). Low- to middle-income workers such as shelter advocates may be particularly impacted by holiday stress. Commercialism and consumerism intensify in American culture during the holidays as retailers and the advertising industry pressure people to buy expensive gifts. The challenge becomes whether the family will have enough money and time to execute the “perfect holiday” without amassing insurmountable credit card debt ([Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 2006](#)).
- The holidays are perceived to be celebrations of joy, but they can also bring sadness. For instance, the first holiday after the death of a loved one can be particularly sad, and subsequent years may serve as reminders or echoes of grief. Similarly, advocates support survivors of domestic violence as they grieve the loss of their intimate relationship or feel the emotional burden of celebrating the holiday as a single parent. Most likely, these describe cases of “situational sadness” where individuals will rebound when the holiday is over ([Bayer, 2003](#)).

GETTING READY FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Creating and nurturing an organization that attends to the well-being of staff and residents is year-round work that may require additional attention during the holiday season, as it can be a time of heightened stress. One of the most important activities that programs can support is having conversations with staff and volunteers about their experiences of the holiday season, reflecting on things that have gone well in the past in addition to discussing the challenges. Many of the ideas that come from this process will likely be helpful at other times of the year. Reflect on questions such as:

- For staff that worked last year during late November and December, what was your work day like? How was it different from other times of the year?
- For those that did not work during that time, what type of feedback did you hear from staff and residents about their experience being in shelter during the holiday season?
- What are your biggest concerns during the holiday season, both personally and professionally? How can we work together as a team this year to improve both staff and residents’ experience during the holidays?
- In what ways does our current environment support staff and address burnout, secondary trauma, and stress?
- What additional supports or changes might we need to make during the holiday season?

These questions open the door for considering strategies that support individual staff coping and well-being, and also encourage reflection on organizational policies, structures, and supports. Consider inviting front-line shelter staff to facilitate this discussion to help foster an environment of open peer-to-peer sharing. Working with staff collaboratively to make changes is necessary for moving the organization forward in a positive way and may reduce feelings of resentment. Staff will be happier, healthier and more invested in the overall work when they are heard within their agencies and have their input valued and actualized.

WAYS TO SUPPORT SHELTER STAFF

There are many ways in which programs can provide emotional support to staff and help them regain the sense of hope, optimism, purpose, and ultimately, the humor that helps us cope with daily life. We must remember that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Offering a range of supportive activities can increase the chances for shelter staff to experience the benefits of wellness. The following cost-effective ideas are most useful if implemented as long-term strategies.

Be sensitive to and address advocate workload, especially during the holidays. Understand that overloading a single staff person with additional responsibilities such as picking up donations, hosting after-hours community events, and organizing donated gifts for shelter residents, can place them at higher risk for burnout. Discuss and plan as a team to help staff manage and share the increased workload that may come during the holiday season. Make sure these conversations include the use of volunteers. Volunteers are an integral part of a nonprofit organization; in order to utilize their time effectively, it's important to identify the areas in which help is needed. They can provide support in the shelter by responding to hotline calls, helping with cooking and grocery shopping, or other associated tasks. A volunteer can provide shelter staff the opportunity to attend a family celebration, take a couple of hours for self care, or even be there to assist staff during night shifts. Of course, caring for volunteer well-being during the holidays is critical too! To read more about how volunteers can provide support to staff during the holidays and the rest of the year, see: [Open Doors: Thinking Beyond Shelter](http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVShelterAlternatives.php) (<http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVShelterAlternatives.php>).

Take care of and demonstrate appreciation for those staff that work overnight shifts in the shelter on nights when holiday celebrations are taking place, particularly in the event that they experience inclement weather and have to remain at the shelter for an extended period of time without relief. Consider making self-care kits available to staff who find themselves in this circumstance, which may include personal toiletry items, a heating pad, sweets, or a handwritten note of appreciation.

Ensure that staff are allowed sufficient time off. This may mean that shelter/program leadership allow for flexible and alternative schedules during this time and that supervisors or volunteers are brought in to help cover shifts at the shelter to meet the needs of frontline advocates.

Encourage breaks and time for self-care. The holidays can be emotionally and physically draining for all of us. Programs can encourage time for respite, fun, and other forms of relaxation, such as walking, yoga, and meditation. Limiting the number of meetings and prioritizing time for self care can help decrease the stress and frustration shelter staff may experience during the holiday season.

Make simple modifications to the physical environment that improve feelings of well-being. Well-functioning workspaces can have positive impacts on advocacy, morale and turnover. Have a conversation with shelter staff regarding the types of stress-reducing sensory experiences that work quickly and effectively for them. For staff who are visual, incorporating soothing and uplifting images around their work spaces can improve a sense of well-being. Consider bringing the outside indoors: buy a plant or some flowers to enliven the space. Some other ways that we can modify the physical environment may include a small fountain, so that staff can enjoy the soothing sound of running water in office, or incorporating essential oils, potpourri or aromatherapy spray (allergy/sensitivity permitting) to soothe the workspace atmosphere.

Be thoughtful about workplace holiday activities and events. Many workplaces plan parties and gift exchanges as ways to celebrate the season and foster employee engagement. In this economy, it is especially important to minimize activities that require employees to spend additional money on workplace gifts or party attire for special occasions. The financial strain that is typically evident during the holidays is exacerbated by the continuing economic crisis.

Provide opportunities for staff to talk about what they are experiencing. During the holidays, offer opportunities for staff to talk about their feelings and experiences. Ideally, this would build upon regular time that staff have with supervisors or peers to reflect on and process their work.

Plan a staff retreat before the holidays. While October is often the busiest time of the year as programs engage in Domestic Violence Awareness Month activities, it may be helpful to plan a staff retreat around this time in preparation for the coming holiday season. This can have a positive impact in the way staff manage the inevitable stressors to come.

SUPPORTING OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER DURING HIGH STRESS TIMES

There are many strategies that we can use to help us cope during periods of higher stress. Sometimes, the things we do during lower stress times (walking, exercise, talking with a friend, taking breaks, or eating well, for example) are harder to do during higher stress times when feelings of being overwhelmed are common. Planning for this ahead of time, with a buddy or a team, can often help. Staff may incorporate self-care or self-awareness check-ins or reflection into staff meetings or supervision.

Some questions to get you started:

- ✓ How do I know when I am feeling stressed? Depleted? How do others know when that is happening for me?
- ✓ How do I know when my co-workers are stressed or depleted? What can I/we do to support each other at work?

Creating a self-care plan is one way to begin, expand, or renew your commitment to self-care rituals or practice. You can download a [self-care template](http://socialworktech.com/2011/05/25/making-a-self-care-plan/) (<http://socialworktech.com/2011/05/25/making-a-self-care-plan/>) from Social Work Tech and create a plan for how you will practice self-care using words, images or pictures. Once you finish your plan you can hang in on your refrigerator or in your workspace as a reminder of your self-care goals.



Creating a Self-Care Plan

Ask yourself:

- What am I already doing well to be self-aware and practice self-care?
- What would I like to do more of?
- What can I do *in the moment* while at work?
- What can I advocate for in order to gain additional supports at work?
- What might I like to do outside of work? Are there people or spaces outside of work who can provide support (friends, family, counselor, people in my religious or spiritual community, support groups)?

Adapted from *Caring for Others While Caring for Ourselves* (webinar) by Susan Blumenfeld, MSW, LCSW, NCDVTMH Child Trauma Training Director

There are many types of self-care plans available for your use. For more information, checklists, and tools on self-care, visit the [Self-Care Starter Kit](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit/how-to-flourish-in-social-work.html) developed by the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Their spring-themed infographic, [How to Flourish in Social Work](http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit/how-to-flourish-in-social-work.html) (<http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit/how-to-flourish-in-social-work.html>) reminds us that there are many resources available to help us discover, plant and grow our self-care practice.

Remember, too, that the holidays can be a time of great joy and peace. As one community-based domestic violence shelter advocate shares:

"I embrace the joy in the holiday season. We have so many amazing donors who help make our clients' holidays beautiful. Strangers buying generous gifts for people they don't know, but whom they know are struggling. Seeing our clients' faces light up at a huge pile of gifts for themselves and their children is the coolest thing ever, especially when they didn't expect to have anything for Christmas at all. I also try to pamper myself, as well as attend holiday parties that I know will be fun." – Eve Yedziniak Hamrick (November 2014)



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Resource List

BOOK

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others (2009) by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk

WEBINARS

Caring for Others While Caring for Ourselves by Susan Blumenfeld, MSW, LCSW, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health
<http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/trainingta/webinars-seminars/2014-10-part-series-building-trauma-informed-services-for-children-youth-and-parents-impacted-by-domestic-violence/>

Sustaining Ourselves in the Work: Trauma-Informed Approaches, Self-awareness, and Self-care by Cathy Cave and Terri Pease, PhD, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health
<http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/trainingta/webinars-seminars/2013-practical-strategies-for-creating-trauma-informed-services-and-organizations/>

SELF-ASSESSMENTS

Professional Quality of Life Scale: Version 5 (ProQOL, 2009) in English and Spanish
http://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html

Compassion Fatigue Self Test (1994) by Florida State University
http://www.ptsdsupport.net/compasion_fatigue-selftest.html

Test How Self-Compassionate You Are (2009) by Kristin Neff
www.self-compassion.org/test-your-self-compassion-level.html

HANDOUTS ON MIND/BODY AND MINDFULNESS-BASED PRACTICES

Fingerhold Practice for Managing Emotions and Stress

The fingerhold practice is a simple technique that combines breathing and holding each finger. Practicing fingerholds can help to manage emotions and stress. It is a useful practice for both adults and children, and you can use the technique for yourself and/or with another person.

Resources for Grounding, Emotional Regulation & Relaxation for Children and Their Parents

This handout describes several practices for grounding, emotional regulation, and relaxation that are useful for adults and children. The practices described in the handout include Draw a Safe Place, Bedtime Beads (adapted from Natalie Caufield), deep breathing exercises, Personal Thermometer, SOS (Slow down, Orient, Self-check), and Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

Both available from the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health at
<http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/publications-products/resource-for-advocates/>.

Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline

Comparing Average Call Volume to Holiday Volume

These statistics represent the experience of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) only. Representatives of state and local programs, along with representatives of law enforcement and medical staff, may have different seasonal experiences with victims and survivors of domestic violence.

Table A: Average Calls vs. Thanksgiving Holidays—Number of Calls to the NDVH, 2004-2013

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<i>Average Week</i>	2660	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257	5110	5075	4725
Thanksgiving Week	2270	2312	3151	3285	3487	3546	4741	4080	4060	4214
The Week After	2779	2752	3596	3759	3831	4102	5432	5244	5207	4769
<i>Average Day</i>	380	409	532	547	584	598	751	730	725	675
Thanksgiving Day	146	166	239	290	332	341	376	344	340	438

Table B: Average Calls vs. Christmas and New Year's Holidays—Number of Calls to NDVH, 2004-2013

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
<i>Average 17 day period</i>	6840	7362	9846	9846	10512	10764	13518	13140	13050	12150
Dec 15 to Jan 1	5660	5625	7403	8540	10094	8367	12259	9958	9788	10991
<i>Average 13 day period</i>	5320	5726	7658	7658	8176	8372	10514	10220	10150	9450
Jan 2 to Jan 15	5935	5956	7563	8415	9413	7511	10702	9161	9001	9644
<i>Average Day</i>	380	409	547	547	584	598	751	730	725	675
Christmas Eve	192	184	234	370	452	304	470	420	421	503
Christmas Day	135	160	208	270	394	258	374	359	355	381
New Years Eve	276	243	283	523	669	422	569	398	395	546
New Years Day	260	236	342	428	508	341	604	429	499	570

The NRC DV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Capacity Building and Education Team at nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org.