

Leading With Respect Handguides

**AMO's Handguide 7
Self-Care for Municipal
Leaders and Staff**

AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides provide practical resources, tips, and tools that elected officials and senior staff can adapt, rebrand, and use to foster civility and respect in municipal governance across Ontario.

There are eight guides in the series.

1. An Introduction to AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides
2. Responding to Constituents
3. Chairing Meetings Effectively
4. Holding Public Meetings
5. Fostering Civility at the Council Table
6. Using Social Media and Online Platforms
- 7. Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff**
8. Professional Development and Education

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7.0 Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff

Municipal work increasingly takes place in high-pressure environments shaped by public scrutiny, complex decision-making, and frequent conflict. These conditions place sustained demands on the mental and emotional capacity of elected officials and staff, making well-being an operational concern as well as a personal one.

Self-care matters because burnout and chronic stress do not only affect individuals; they shape how institutions function. In municipal roles, fatigue, hypervigilance, and emotional exhaustion can impair judgement, narrow attention to immediate crises, and increase the likelihood of escalation in already tense situations.

Over time, unmanaged stress contributes to staff turnover, withdrawal from public engagement, and weakened democratic participation. Protecting mental well-being is therefore central to risk management, workplace safety, and public trust.

The section outlines practical strategies for recognizing and responding to stress before it becomes debilitating. It identifies early warning signs of burnout and offers self-protection and recovery practices. This section also highlights the role of peer and professional support networks in sustaining perspective and judgement.

7.1 Warning Signs of Burnout

In municipal roles marked by high scrutiny and frequent conflict, mental well-being is a professional requirement. Sustained exposure to pressure and hostility increases the risk of burnout, which rarely appears suddenly. It develops when ongoing stress outpaces recovery. Recognizing early warning signs allows for intervention before health, judgement, or performance are affected.



Physical signs often appear first:

Persistent fatigue

Exhaustion despite rest, insomnia, or frequent waking.

Stress-related symptoms

Headaches, muscle tension, chest discomfort, or digestive issues.

Physical anxiety

Elevated heart rate or blood pressure outside of acute situations.



Cognitive and decision making signs are especially consequential in leadership roles:

Decision fatigue

Difficulty making routine or low-stakes decisions.

Narrowed focus

Trouble balancing immediate demands with long-term goals.

Reduced concentration

Difficulty focusing in meetings or reviewing material.



Emotional and behavioural signs often become visible to others:

Hypervigilance

Constantly anticipating conflict or hostility.

Emotional masking

Feeling compelled to act calm or show interest you do not feel.

Compassion fatigue

Reduced empathy, growing cynicism toward constituents.

Withdrawal

Avoiding public engagement, colleagues, or meetings.

Irritability

Shortened temper or difficulty managing frustration.

It is important to note, however, that burnout is rarely isolated to one individual. Organizational warning signs include increased absenteeism and turnover, declining morale, and a defensive or distrustful posture toward the public.

7.2 Practical and Realistic Self-Protection Strategies

Safety protocols must be standard operating procedure, not an afterthought to combat increasing incivility. Effective self-protection requires a holistic approach that secures your physical environment and your mental bandwidth.

Psychological Self-defence

Protecting your decision-making capacity is as important as physical safety.

Validate the Experience: Acknowledge that harassment is a systemic issue, not a "part of the job" you must silently endure. If you feel hypervigilance or dread, step back and engage your support network immediately.

Monitor Your "Battery": Be alert to signs of anxiety (hypervigilance) or depression (difficulty concentrating, irritability). These are not weaknesses; they are physiological responses to chronic stress that impair your ability to serve.

Normalize Professional Support: Just as CEOs use executive coaching, municipal leaders should utilize therapy and counseling to maintain performance. Access organizational resources or private therapy to address trauma and protect your family from the stress of your role.

Mandatory Debriefing: After a hostile interaction, engage in immediate "peer debriefing." This quick conversation off-loads stress and helps "close the stress cycle" so you do not carry the incident home.

Tactical & Operational Breaks

Recovery is an operational requirement, not a luxury.

The "Time Out": During a heated interaction, if you feel your control slipping, call a "time out." Tell the individual, "These are important questions/comments. I need a five-minute break to review the file," and step away. This allows emotions to cool and helps you regain control of the interaction.

Protect Your Recovery Time: Resilience requires regular time away from high-pressure environments. Enforce basic boundaries like taking lunch breaks and annual leave to prevent decision fatigue and irritability.

Digital Hygiene and Situational Awareness

Filter, Don't Absorb: If possible, have a staff member monitor social media feeds to flag threats. This keeps everyone informed of potential risks.

Document Everything: Do not delete abusive messages immediately. Screenshot and log them to establish a pattern of conduct, which is essential if legal intervention becomes necessary.

Strict Boundaries: Do not conduct municipal business on personal social media or private phone lines.

De-Escalation and Disengagement

Name the Behaviour: If a person shouts or becomes aggressive, explicitly name it:
"I cannot continue this meeting if you are yelling".

The "Broken Record": If a person escalates, do not argue or justify. Repeat your boundary calmly and consistently (e.g., *"As I said, I am ending this call now."*).

Disengage: You have no obligation to endure abuse. If you feel an imminent risk of harm, remove yourself immediately. Go to a secure area and lock the door.

Administrative Tools

When informal strategies fail, use formal mechanisms to protect the institution.

Incident Reporting: Log every security incident. A pattern of minor aggressions often precedes a major event; documentation allows the municipality to spot the escalation and intervene.

Restrict Access: Use trespass notices to ban threatening individuals from municipal property. This is a valid administrative response to ensure workplace safety.

7.3 Peer Support Options

Municipal leadership can be isolating. Elected officials and senior staff often operate without true peers inside their own organizations and may feel constrained in what they can share publicly or internally. Over time, this isolation limits perspective and increases the risk of misjudgement during high-pressure situations.

Seeking peer support beyond one's immediate personal or professional circle—through networks of colleagues in other municipalities, professional associations, or mentorship groups—can counteract this isolation. External peers provide perspective, continuity, and comparison, helping leaders distinguish between personal strain and systemic pressure, and offering a safe space to reflect on challenging decisions.

Peer Connections

A small external “reality-check” network—such as a mentor, coach, or trusted colleague outside your reporting line—can play a critical role. These individuals are positioned to notice shifts in judgement, tone, or risk tolerance that may not be visible internally, particularly during prolonged controversy or crisis.

Cross-Jurisdictional, Role-Based Networks

For elected officials, peer support within one's own council may be complicated by political dynamics. Cross-jurisdictional and role-based networks—such as mayor-to-mayor or CAO-to-CAO groups—often provide safer forums for candid discussion. These connections help normalize challenges and reduce the tendency to interpret persistent conflict or abuse as individual failure.

Professional Association Resources

Beyond informal relationships, municipal staff should make use of professional association resources designed specifically for leadership support.

- AMO offers a range of opportunities through its conferences, forums, and education workshops. Workshop topics have included The Mayor-CAO Relationship; and an array of topics from managing conflict, human rights, land use planning, as only some examples. AMO is currently developing a peer-to-peer (mentoring) support program, new council education and more.
- The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) offers Leadership Hubs that provide access to executive coaching, consultations with practice experts, and training related to leadership resilience and workplace civility.

These services connect leaders with peers who understand the legal, political, and administrative pressures unique to municipal roles.

Affinity-Based Networks

Leaders from underrepresented groups, including women and racialized officials, often face more frequent and targeted harassment. Affinity-based networks, such as women in local government associations and candidate attraction and support organizations, can provide tailored strategies and shared understanding that general peer networks may not fully offer.

Peer support should be understood as a professional infrastructure, not a personal coping mechanism. Maintaining these connections helps sustain judgement, perspective, and decision-making capacity over the long term.

Learn More

Organization	Links
American Psychological Association Impact of election stress	apa.org
American Psychological Association Managing stress related to political change	apa.org
Canadian Association of Municipal Administrations Standing Strong Toolkit (PDF)	camacam.ca
New Zealand Parliament Ombudsman Managing unreasonable complainant conduct (PDF)	ombudsman.parliament.nz
Better Politics Foundation Mere Mortals – The State of Politicians’ Mental Wellbeing and Why It Matters	betterpolitics.foundation
AMCTO Your Voice Matters: Results from Our Harassment & Incivility Survey	amcto.com
Canadian Centre for Addictions 7 Warning Signs of Burnout at Work	canadiancentreforaddictions.org
Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Mental Health - Job Burnout	ccohs.ca
Queen’s University Burnout: Signs, Causes, and Preventative Strategies	pros.educ.queensu.ca

Candidate Support Organization	Links
electHER NOW	electhernow.ca
Equal Voice	equalvoice.ca
Guelph Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ Guelph
Leadership féminin Prescott-Russell	leadershipfemininpr.ca
Nominee	gonominee.com
Operation Black Vote Canada	obvc.ca
Oxford Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ oxford
PoliticsNOW	polinow.org
ProudPolitics	proudpolitics.org
The Canadian-Muslim Vote	canadianmuslimvote.ca
The Jean Collective	thejeancollective.ca
Waterloo Region Women's Campaign School	wrrwomenrun.wordpress.com
Wellington Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ wellington



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