

About Being a Visitor

A guide for leaders and visitors

Reprint from www.bikurcholimcc.org

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About Being a Visitor...

Our good intentions can be enhanced with skill, grace, and efficiency. The ideal visitor needs to be mindful as he/she provides optimistic support, assistance toward independence and a listening ear.

Hiddur (Hebrew for "beautify") is the concept of enhancement of a mitzvah through beautification. Conventionally, hiddur applies to the ritualistic aspects of religious observance: the ornamented kiddush cup, the special holiday tablecloth.

In our context, *hiddur* means carrying out the mitzvah of bikur cholim in a sensitive and thoughtful manner. By educating ourselves to act knowledgeably in the performance of this mitzvah, we bring the spirit of the Jewish community to those who need comfort and connection.

Bikur cholim can be performed effectively as a caring individual. But there are advantages to organizing in a group. This allows tasks to be shared, gives support to each member and increases training possibilities. The value of studying, discussing and performing the mitzvah of bikur cholim in a group setting is manifold. The group forms a body of support and resources as the visitors listen to each other's problems, share ideas and offer helpful suggestions.

Over time, they may find in each other a source of strength, mutual esteem and build a community of caring.

Jewish Tradition and Bikur Cholim

The Talmud Nedarim 39b teaches us the importance of bikur cholim through a story:

Rabbi Helbo once fell ill. Thereupon Rabbi Kahana went and proclaimed: "Rabbi Helbo is ill!" But none visited him. He rebuked them [the scholars], saying, "Did it not once happen that one of Rabbi Akiva's disciples fell sick, and the Sages did not visit him? So Rabbi Akiva himself entered [the disciple's house] to visit him, and because they swept and sprinkled the ground before him, he recovered. 'My master,' said the disciple, 'you have revived me!' Whereupon Rabbi Akiva went forth and lectured: 'He who does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood.'"

Rabbi Akiva is teaching the importance of a visit and the fact that no one is too prominent to do what is needed, even menial tasks, and of the necessity of using the visit as an opportunity to assess those practical needs.

The Babylonian Talmud Brakhot 5b tells another story:

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He (Hanina) said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Yochanan replied: "Neither they nor their reward." He (Hanina) said to him: "Give me your hand." He (Yochanan) gave him his hand and he

About Being a Visitor... continued

raised him. Why could not R. Yochanan raise himself? They replied:
"They prisoner cannot free himself from jail."

The story affirms the importance of reaching out and helping someone with their affliction. No matter how powerful or learned they may be, people need help as they deal with their illness.

There is greater need for communal concern and action to sustain people with chronic health problems and isolated living situations as our population ages, as hospital visits become shorter and as geographic distance between family members' increases.

Jewish tradition offers guidelines for visiting.

- [Laws of Bikur Cholim](#)
- [Tips for Visitors](#)
- [Conversation Essentials](#)
- [Prayers for Visitors](#)
- [Telephone Visits](#)
- [Looking After Yourself](#)
- [Getting Started](#)

Please contact us if we can assist you or your group in better performing the mitzvah of bikur cholim. There are also many meaningful opportunities locally for visitors or volunteers throughout the service programs of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS).

A Digest of Laws of Bikur Cholim

Compiled from the Shulhan Arukh (16th Century text) & Rabbinic Literature

Visiting the sick is in emulation of the Almighty's own actions, when He visited Abraham after his circumcision: "The Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day" (Gen. 18:1).

Visiting the sick is included in the category of *Gemilut Hasadim*, "the performance of good deeds", but is singled out by the rabbis as something special. It is one of the mitzvot whose fruit is enjoyed in this world and principally in the world to come.

Some authorities maintain bikur cholim is one of the 613 commandments of the Torah, while others hold it a rabbinic command, derived from "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18).

One may not receive remuneration for bikur cholim.

Bikur cholim has no boundaries or limits, i.e., one may visit as frequently as he likes, provided he does not tax the ill; youth may visit the elderly and the elderly may visit the youth; men may visit women and women men, though they may not attend to the other's intimate needs.

One who visits removes a sixtieth of the patient's illness. One who should visit and doesn't, harms the patient and is regarded as "shedding blood".

The essence of the mitzvah of bikur cholim is to attend to the needs of the patient and pray for his recovery. In his presence, the visitor may pray for the patient in any language; in his absence, only Hebrew. The patient himself should be encouraged to pray, ask for forgiveness and repent.

One should not inform a patient of the death of a friend or relative, even one for whom the patient must sit Shivah, because of the obvious harm that might result.

Some authorities recommend that one not visit alone, but always with others.

A visitor should not spend time with those who are suffering from intestinal disorders, speech problems, or mental disturbances, when the visit is likely to prove difficult or embarrassing to the patient. Better to just say hello and inquire about his needs from a distance.

It is best not to visit in the early or late part of the day or at any other time a patient may be receiving treatment.

Some say one should not visit his enemy, but others permit it. The patient should never be allowed to feel that his enemy rejoices over his illness. Each case must be judged individually.

In case of a time conflict, the mitzvah of comforting the bereaved takes precedence over the mitzvah of visiting the sick, because comforting the bereaved is an act of

A Digest of Laws of Bikur Cholim... continued

loving kindness performed for the living and the dead. Where no such conflict exists, however, visiting the sick takes precedence because that act is equivalent of adding life to the ill.

Tips For Visitors...

Bikur cholim visiting skills are skills for life. They include being fully present, and being a good listener and knowing proper visiting etiquette. These guidelines will help you in communicating your caring intention and being an effective visitor:

Being fully present
Being a good listener
Keeping it real
Etiquette do's and don'ts
Anxiety and depression
Building trust
Engage in reminiscing

Being fully present

1. Try to put yourself in the other person's place.
2. Put aside daydreams and distraction from one's own problems or concerns.
3. Be alert to truly being with the person in front of you.

Being a good listener

Listening skills communicate empathy and understanding and can help facilitate a conversation.

Your posture conveys interest:

1. Maintain good eye-contact, sit at eye level if possible.
2. Use non-verbal encouragement such as nodding one's head or "uh huh..."
3. Lean forward slightly, and relax.
4. Avoid fidgeting, or making impatient gestures like watching the clock.

Listening:

1. Remain neutral and non-judgmental, with an open heart. This way you are more likely to really hear what the person is trying to convey. You can help them to put these feelings into words.
2. Reflect what you hear expressed, not how *you* would react. Listen between the lines to what emotion or feeling is being voiced. For example: "That sounds very hard," "You are very concerned about what you are going to hear."
3. Become comfortable with silence. Allow the person time to think and react. This will also convey an acceptance of what is being communicated without judgment.

Tips For Visitors... continued

4. Above all, compassionate listening is being interested in what the person is sharing and being sensitive to take your cue from them. Follow their lead. Talking about the latest movie you saw or the recent surgery could be equally appreciated.

Keeping it real

1. Never say "I know how you feel." Everyone experiences pain differently; even people who suffer the same ailments perceive it differently. You can say "It sounds like you think (feel) it's pretty bad (sad/mad/glad). I'm here and I'm listening."
2. Use open-ended questions to keep up the conversation. These begin with "How... What... Could you tell me more about...?" Closed-ended questions that are less likely to elicit conversation begin "Who, When, Where."
3. Try not to mind-read and finish another person's sentences. When you truly listen actively you may be surprised where the person was going with his/her thought.
4. The visitor should not minimize or laugh off fears expressed by patients, even when they seem exaggerated.
5. Don't be afraid to clarify or gently explore what you are hearing. When a person is willing, you may ask questions to get to the heart of the matter.

Visiting Etiquettes Do's and Don'ts

Do's:

1. Knock on a patient's door before entering. Do not enter suddenly.
2. Ask if the patient would like a visit. This question gives some control back to a patient.
3. Say hello to all patients in the room.
4. Do not shake hands. This is for the patient's sake.
5. Ask if you may sit down. Introduce yourself—who you are, where you're from, and the intention of your visit.
6. Sit on a chair, not on the bed so that you are at eye level with the person you are visiting.
7. If necessary, look around the room for cues to conversation. Ask about photographs, drawings, or other objects.

Don'ts:

1. Don't wake up a sleeping patient. Instead, leave a note or card indicating that you were there.

Tips For Visitors... continued

2. Don't stare at a person's scar or disfigurement.
3. Don't fear using humor, if appropriate and sensitive to that person's situation.
4. Don't interrupt if the patient is with the doctor. Return at a different time.
5. Don't offer medical advice, nor question the doctor's judgment. Resist the temptation to give advice or criticize the staff. Redirect questions more appropriate for the medical or social worker with a statement such as, "That would be a good question to ask the nurse/doctor/social worker."

A word about anxiety and depression in those you are visiting.

To foster communication, it is extremely useful to recognize any emotional issues common to people experiencing illness or disability:

Anxiety is often the inevitable result of the uncertainties of illness and hospitalization. The loss of control over one's life may often bring feelings of self-doubt and helplessness.

Depression can be a normal and limited emotional response to a current illness; or even a physiological reaction to the stress, depletion, or "chemical imbalance" caused by the illness. Often people respond to the opportunity to express his/her thoughts and feelings. It is not necessary or helpful to reassure the patient too quickly or unrealistically. If the patient speaks of feeling depressed, it can be useful to listen and get him/her to focus from generalized malaise to identifying his/her worst worry.

It is more helpful for the visitor to remember that often just listening to the patient's fears and frustrations, anger and bitterness, can, by itself, aid in the healing process. By allowing the patient to vent negative feelings and doubts, and then reflecting them back in a thoughtful and friendly manner, the bikur cholim visitor may help put these feelings in perspective.

Confidentiality — "a sacred trust" — re-emphasized

The bikur cholim visitor is obligated to always protect a patient's privacy. Commonly, institutions such as hospitals will ask for a signed statement of confidentiality from volunteers.

An important distinction must be drawn, however, between tale-bearing and helpful reporting. You must be alert to situations that might call for professional intervention. Observations you have made that may be crucial to a patient's well-being should be referred to either your group coordinator or to the institution's staff. All communication and the activity of bikur cholim is to be kept confidential. When in doubt speak to a chaplain/rabbi.

Building trust in a visit

Tips For Visitors... continued

Building trust with someone you've just met sometimes takes time, and not everyone will choose to open up personal discussion initially, if at all. If you want to build trust it is important to be consistent, keep promises, be discrete and emphasize the confidential nature of all interactions that take place in a visit.

To maintain engagement, you might bring along some cards, or a book to read from, and be prepared to talk about general subjects of interest. Possible topics for discussion: current events, community developments, art and music, jokes, movies. Things you could bring: crossword puzzles, checkers, scrabble, interesting photos. Try going for a walk with person in a wheelchair for a change of scenery.

Engage in reminiscing

"People say 40 years ago were better times: What do you think?" Reminiscing can be a useful part of a visit — especially when visiting the homebound/elderly/nursing homes.

What reminiscing can do for us:

1. Learn from the past — thinking about how things were and what we were like reminds us of life lessons.
2. Feel better — laughing about how we managed without money or convenience and thinking about positive things makes us feel better.
3. Positive aging — exercising our minds keeps us active and alert mentally even when our bodies slow down physically.
4. Have fun comparing neighborhoods, lifestyles — comparing neighborhoods reminds us that we have a lot in common. Sharing brings closeness.

Topics for sharing memories:

Inventions that changed your life

What are some of the things you had in your home that no longer exists? How did you manage? What was the experience like for you? What household chores were you responsible for that, due to technology, are no longer necessary? Describe the job — its importance, e.g. ice-cube tray. How did the technology change our lives? How does it feel to talk about it now?

Neighborhoods

What did every neighborhood need — and have — that no longer exists? What was your old neighborhood like — peddlers, neighbors, stores? What kinds of memories are attached to this? What unique qualities of living then would you like to see in existence now? Negative changes, positive changes?

Amusements

What did you do for fun? What was fun about it? Who played with you? What do you remember most fondly? What are your favorite recreations or pastimes? How have your tastes changed over the years?

Tips For Visitors... continued

To the visitor: listen, learn, and appreciate the continuum in Life.

Conversation Essentials...

Visiting is an investment of time and includes attention, patience, perceptive listening, sincere concern, openness, and communication skills.

As in all verbal communication, tone of voice is very important and can change the meaning behind the question.

Below are techniques to help facilitate communication when making a visit or talking with the person on the phone:

*"Pleasant words
are like a
honeycomb,
sweet to the
palate and a
cure for the
body"
—Proverbs
16:24*

Open-ended questions

- Use questions that elicit an in-depth response, one that cannot be answered with "yes" or "no."
- Use "How" and "What" instead of "Do," "Did," and "Were."
- Examples:
 - Are you feeling upset right now? (Closed)
 - How do you feel right now? (Open)
 - Do you like to read? (Closed)
 - What are some activities that you enjoy doing? (Open)
- Open ended questions are good conversation starters:
 - What was it like growing up in the 1930s (or other date)?
 - How is your family doing?
 - What do you think about_____?

Help the person expand

- "Tell me more..."
- "Tell me about it..."
- "You seem upset..."

Ask questions to better understand

- "I'm not sure I really know what you mean when you say..."
- "Let's go over that one more time."

Redirect the conversation

- "Thank you for your concern, but I'd really like to hear about..."
- "You mentioned before that..."
- "Let's go back to..."

Conversation Essentials... continued

Review past and present efforts at problem solving

- "Have you talked with anyone about this?"
- "What do you usually do when...?"
- "What have you done about this so far?"
- "What choices do you feel you might have?"

Seven ways of asking "How are you?" (Courtesy of Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW)

Simply asking "How are you?" may not convey your authentic personal interest and invite an honest, expressive response. Some people who are suffering have criticized this common question because it doesn't seem to acknowledge the very different course their life has taken—and can encourage automatic expected answers such as "I'm OK" or "Fine, thanks," which may not be a sincere reply or convey the whole story. Below are some suggested alternatives.

1. How are you doing with all of this?
2. How are your spirits?
3. How are you hanging in?
4. What do you need the most, right now?
5. What's helping you get through this?
6. What's been on your mind as you try to cope with all of this?
7. What are some of the obstacles to your managing/copeing?

Avoid double-questions

- Asking more than one question at a time makes it *difficult* for the person to answer one or both of them.
 - "How are you feeling? Pretty bad, huh?"
 - "How are things going at home and with your family?"
- In holding a conversation, ask one question and then wait for the answer.

Avoid "Why" questions

- At times, "why" questions are used as a way to convey judgment and can be misunderstood.
- Asking "Why?" makes a person feel as though you are attacking his or her ideas.
- Questions can be easily rephrased to avoid any misunderstandings, for example:
 - "Why are you late?" vs. "What caused your delay?"
 - "Why did you quit your job?" vs. "How is it that you decided to quit your job?"

Avoid these responses

Conversation Essentials... continued

- "Oh, don't worry. Everything will turn out all right."
- "Oh, yes, I know exactly how you feel. As a matter of fact, let me tell you about what happened to me once..."
- "What a mistake. You must really regret what you did."
- "Well, if I were you..."

Active listening

- Show that you have heard what the person said by summarizing briefly the meaning of what was said and checking by asking if you understood his or her feelings correctly.
- When you listen, just listen. Do not plan your reply while waiting for your turn to talk. Wait until the person talking finishes. This way you can gather all the information before responding.
- Make a restatement or paraphrase. Reflect the feeling or emotion behind what you think was said.
 - Statement: "No one really cares about me."

Visitor: "You feel that no one especially is looking out for you?"
 - Statement: "I just couldn't tell her because we were never alone. All those other people are always around."

Visitor: "You'd like to get her alone long enough to tell her."
- Do not give advice. Help others to see their strengths and recognize their resources and alternatives. Let them come to their own conclusions.

Keep an open mind.

Be aware of your own values, beliefs, and prejudices. You are participating in another person's world, not judging it.

Prayers for Visitors...

Traditionally, prayer has been an integral part of a bikur cholim visit, with two main purposes: 1) comforting the sick and 2) helping them experience, in a tangible way, a connection with the Jewish community.

Jewish sources cite specific prayers to be offered at the bedside of the sick. The Shulchan Aruch (16th century Code of Jewish Law) prescribes prayers to be recited both with and for the patient. Including the prayer emphasizes the connection of the patient with the entire Jewish community, "May G-d have compassion upon you among the sick of Israel". Even the simple "May G-d grant you a *refuah shlemah*" (full recovery) or even merely saying "*shalom*" can have the power to impart concern, caring, and a community connection.

Bikur cholim visitors and patients will feel varying degrees of comfort with prayer. Ask "May I say a Prayer?" "Would you like a prayer said for you? It is customary if you like." If unfamiliar with the tradition, a patient may even become frightened or confused by such recitations; e.g. mistakenly assuming they mean that he/she is gravely ill or about to die. Since prayers delivered perfunctorily or self-consciously may not bring solace to a patient the visitor needs to know their own comfort level with prayer and let that be a guiding factor.

As is true with any aspect of bikur cholim, the true mitzvah lies not the recitation of prayer alone, but in the degree to which it is in tune with the patient's needs.

The MiSheberach

This is often considered the most traditional prayer for one who is ill. It is usually recited during the Torah service at synagogue. Offering to say it at someone's bedside is also very comforting and healing. The individual's Hebrew name is often included in this blessing. The name is inserted in the blanks provided and it usually includes the person's mother's Hebrew name, as well.

May the One who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and our foremothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bless and heal this person,
_____ the son/daughter of _____.
May the Holy One, blessed be God, be merciful and strengthen and heal him/her. Grant him/her a complete and speedy recovery—healing of body and healing of soul. And let us say: Amen.

מי שברך
אבותינו אברהם, יצחק ויעקב,
ואמותינו שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאה,
הוא יברך וירפא
את ההולה _____ בן/בת _____

הקדוש ברוך הוא
ימלא רחמים עליו/עליה,
להחלימו/להחלימה,
ולרפאותו/ולרפאותה,
להחזיקו/להחזיקה,
ולהחיותו/ולהחיותה

וישלה לו/לה במהרה
רפואה שלמה,
רפואת הנפש ורפואת הגוף,
בתוך שאר הולי ישראל והולי יושבי תבל,
השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב
ונאמר, אמן!

Prayer for Healing

—Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, 18th Century Jewish Mystic

Prayers for Visitors... continued

God of wholeness,
God of healing,
Hear our words,
Accept our prayers; Send a special blessing
O healing
To (name) son/daughter of
(mother's name),
among all those of Your children
who are in need of
Your healing blessing.

Prayer for the visitor

Prayer can be used to gather our strength and to focus before or after a visit.

Blessing for Bikkur Cholim Volunteers

An original prayer composed for the closing the 14th Annual Bikur Cholim Conference, NYC, by Rabbi Sara O'Donnell Adler, MetroWest Jewish Health and Healing Center. November 18, 2001

Eloheinu V'Elohei Avoteinu V'Imoteinu,
God of our ancestors,
We are grateful to You for having given us
The opportunity to gather today in peace and safety–
To explore, share and nurture our ideas and our dreams
Of caring for a broken world.

We thank You for wisdom, for the experiences of others,
And for the anticipation of greeting new challenges.
We thank You for giving us the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim*,
For giving us hands for reaching and hearts for listening.

We thank You for giving us eyes that gaze into others' souls,
And we thank You for the presence of Your *Shechinah*
That hovers in the many places we visit.

Elohei HaShamayim, Most High G-d,
Shine forth Your blessing to the community
Of caregivers gathered here today.

Give us courage and renewed energy
During these challenging times
To do our holy work of caring in good faith.

Make us worthy to look upon every sufferer
With clear eyes and open hearts. May we be
Agents of compassion, representatives of hope,
Messengers of laughter and light.

Prayers for Visitors... continued

May our own lives be blessed with wellness and security
So that we may continue to bring to others the gift of ourselves.

And let us say: *Amen*.

We offer these several prayers from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov to inspire you as you continue to search your heart for effective means of communicating.

Effective Words

—Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, 18th Century Jewish Mystic

G-d of wisdom,
Teach me the right words.
Teach me the very words
That will touch the hearts
And souls of others.
When a friend needs
My understanding ear,
Teach me the words to say
That will strengthen,
That will encourage,
That will express
Only my love
And concern

Effective Silence

—Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, 18th Century Jewish Mystic

Teach me, Dear G-d,
That often
The most effective words
Are no words at all.
Teach me how and when
To communicate
With that most potent gift
Of silence

Being a Telephone Visitor...

The ubiquitous telephone! How many of us have gotten calls that lift our spirits or warm our hearts? With forethought and skill the telephone can be used for bikur cholim in a meaningful and efficient way. Many points of visiting are the same whether face-to-face or via the telephone, but some are different. Both require us to be mindful of the ways we use ourselves so that we are most helpful when we visit.

People who are ill, have disabilities, are elderly, and/or homebound may frequently find themselves increasingly isolated. As a telephone visitor, you can bring hope to someone in need—including the need to know that someone cares. This can be done through a casual conversation, news from the community, an interesting story, or even a few shared moments of silence. Visitors benefit by performing a valuable mitzvah and often gain a sense of satisfaction and self-worth. In these ways, telephone visiting can play a vital role in the life of our community.

Techniques for the Telephone Visitor

Those you call should be prepared for the brief, limited type of contact you will be making with them. Both caller and recipient need to know, appreciate, and accept these boundaries. Within a synagogue, understanding the nature of the call can be communicated through an article in the news bulletin, through the rabbi, or through the people in the community getting the word out about the program and finding out who needs a call.

Some communities have people calling when someone returns from the hospital, when finished with Shiva, or has a new baby. Calls can be daily to check on someone's well being or weekly to lift someone's spirit.

Beginning a telephone relationship

- Keep in mind your main job is to develop a friendly, trusting and limited telephone relationship.
- Agree on a time and day of the phone call.
- Be sure to have emergency number and emergency plan if there is no answer.
- For the first few calls, continue to formally introduce yourself until you feel the person easily recognizes you and understands why you are calling.
- Record any specific information or current issues in your person's life so you may remember and refer to it the next time you call.

Telephone conversation may require verbal feedback, "I'm listening," as commentary to reassure the person you called that you are "with them" in the absence of face to face interaction. Silence, under the circumstances of telephone visiting, is not necessarily golden!

Suggested conversation for the telephone call

Being a Telephone Visitor... continued

- Formally introduce yourself until the person easily recognizes you, i.e., "Hello, this is _____, your Telephone Visitor," from Synagogue or Congregation, etc."
- Follow with questions such as, "I'm calling to say hello and want to know if everything is okay," "How are you today?" "How are you feeling?" "Anything you think I might need to know?" etc.
- Close your conversation with, "Okay, I just wanted to check in (wish you a good Shabbos...) and will call you again _____."

Ending a Visit — Saying Goodbye

Establish the following routine from the first phone call:

- Keep track of the time
- *Before* it is time to say goodbye, prepare by saying something like "It is almost time for me to say goodbye for today."
- Review the day and time of next visit, perhaps mentioning what you might plan to discuss. Express your enjoyment of the time spent that day.

Should there appear to be a problem developing in the person's life

Clearly there will be those times when something is happening, and obtaining more information during your phone call is appropriate.

Once you have a sense or a picture of the problem, state that you are concerned about the person and what he/she is saying to you. Explain that you would like to help and the best way you can do this is to share what has been told to you with the Coordinator or Rabbi confidentially. If he/she agrees to this, call the Coordinator or Rabbi.

The person might be resistant to this. It is important to respect their wishes and privacy. In this case, discuss the situation in confidence with a member of your Bikur Cholim Committee or synagogue so that together you can strategize how you might proceed.

Being a Telephone Visitor...

Participation as a bikur cholim visitor will bring you satisfaction, growth, and strength of spirit. The work is rewarding. Keep in mind the importance of knowing your strengths and limitations. Our personal experiences with and feelings about illness, disability, aging, death and dying all influence our reactions and relationships to those we visit.

On Boundaries:

"When we have good intentions and are clear that what we are doing has merit, then when we set boundaries we need not be apologetic, and there is no shame in that for ourselves or for the other. Healthy boundaries are established when the attributes of lovingkindness and strength are in balance..."

—Rabbi Uzi Weingarten, *"Communicating with Compassion"* 2003

Signs you may be too involved

1. You are distracted at home and find yourself frequently wanting to talk about the person you are visiting. You are unable to get the patient off your mind.
2. You are overwhelmed by your own feelings of fear, anger and helplessness.
3. You find yourself saying "that could be me."

Factors influencing burn-out

1. Lack of boundaries of what you/your group can and can not do.
2. Unrealistic expectations, spreading yourself too thin or wanting to 'fix' people's problems.
3. Identifying too closely with a patient's experience, reminding you of yourself or a loved one who suffered.

Saying "NO"

It is especially hard to say NO to two groups of people: people for whom we feel sorry and people for whom we care. Remember your role, your intentions and your limits. But when asked to do something that you do not feel comfortable doing, it can still be hard to decline.

Be as brief as possible:

Simply state a legitimate reason for your refusal, "I really don't have the time," and avoid elaborate explanations, justifications, and "lies" (e.g. "I can't because my mother is coming in from out of town" or "My child is ill").

Actually say the word "No" when declining:

The word "no" has more power and is less ambiguous than, "Well, I just don't think so" or "We'll see" or "I can't just now." You might need to say "NO" several times before the person hears you.

Looking After Yourself... continued

What you can do if you suspect you are burning-out

1. Talk to your bikur cholim leader or peers. Get support. You are not alone.
2. Go to a training. Figure out if you need to play a different role in your group.
3. Take some time off.
4. Set realistic goals

Stress Management Tips

1. Nurture yourself. List 5 things that you enjoy doing. Choose something that inspires or sustains (e.g. exercise, buy flowers, take a relaxing bath, nap, see a movie, listen to music, gardening).
2. Utilize deep breathing and relaxation exercises.
3. Journaling. Write out your thoughts. Be spontaneous. You can record what is stressing you or whatever surfaces as you put pen to paper.

Remember: Think positively of your accomplishments. Compliment yourself!

Getting Started...

Bikur cholim is a mitzvah which offers many ways to participate. You may start informally, cultivating opportunities to be mindful and diligent with those in your circle of family, friends, and neighbors. Visiting can be as easy as picking up a telephone and calling a homebound senior or knocking on a neighbor's door offering to shop.

When you wish to expand your efforts into community borders, contact a bikur cholim group in your community — often these are affiliated with synagogues and JCC's. (Or contact us for assistance in locating local groups.) To start a new group, see our [Organizing a Group](#) section.

If you are able to be in New York City in November, it may be helpful to come to the Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council Annual Conference to gain inspiration and inspire others.

The first step:

Remember: "Think big, start small..." Endeavors of all sizes count, their impact can not be quantified. Small gestures can make a difference. Don't underestimate their impact.

What if I can't visit/I'm afraid of hospitals?

If for whatever reason you are not able to visit people, there are many more opportunities to play a role in bikur cholim other than going to the hospital. For example, you can contribute by making phone calls to those who are isolated, posting articles about bikur cholim news in the synagogue bulletin, helping out with shopping, and serving as a catalyst for bikur cholim awareness and activity in your community. There is something for all of us to get involved with.

I'm not sure what to say when I visit someone?

The purpose of a bikur cholim visit is to let the person know that they are remembered. We do this with our presence — by showing up! Whether it is a face to face or a phone visit. (See also Tips for Visitors)

*What if the person does not want a visit?
(Or "The Successful Non-Visit!")*

There are two parts to a successful visit: The visitor's positive intention to be present with the visited, and the visited's willingness to be visited. Asking someone if they would like a visit is especially meaningful. Firstly, it restores control to the visited. Secondly, the 'mere' asking conveys respect and dignity to the visited. This can help to counterbalance feelings of dependency and feeling a lack of control. It is better for the visited to have the option to refuse, which puts the power in their hands. If the person does not want a visit, you can try again later.