

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a collection of symptoms that can result from the stress of caring for and supporting individuals, particularly those in difficult situations and with challenging medical and mental health symptoms, such as those impacted by trauma. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network further states that compassion fatigue can result from simply hearing about the emotional duress of another person. Many individuals and groups who regularly work with persons who have experienced trauma, such as health care workers, first responders, mental health professionals, caretakers, and educators, develop symptoms of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue can take a toll on a person's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, and them less effective in providing care to the people they serve. As service providers, educators, and caretakers, it is important for us to understand and address compassion fatigue, so that we can provide the best care and support for others as possible, as well as promote a healthy life balance and level of satisfaction for ourselves.

One of the most common and serious symptoms of compassion fatigue is denial. As service providers, educators, and caretakers, it is often our instinct to put the mental and physical health of others above our own. Sometimes admitting our own struggles can make us feel that we are not adequately doing our jobs or make us question our own strength and resilience. It is important to recognize and remind ourselves, that working with people who have experienced or are experiencing trauma is emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting. It is okay and normal to feel frustration, sadness, hopelessness, anger, or other emotions as a result of trying to help another person. Resist the urge to deny and downplay the challenges. Instead, admit to yourself and someone you trust how you are being affected and work to provide yourself with the self-care you need to do your job effectively.

The first step in working through compassion fatigue is being aware of the symptoms in yourself, others, and in your group (e.g. your school staff). The symptoms of compassion fatigue are similar to those that people with trauma may exhibit and include:

- social withdrawal and isolation
- anxiety and worry
- depression
- trouble focusing or lack of motivation
- sleep difficulties
- over or under eating
- misuse of substances (e.g. alcohol, smoking, marijuana, pills, etc.)
- irritability or aggression

You may also notice symptoms that signal that compassion fatigue may be problematic for an entire community following a traumatic event that affects many people such as a pandemic or school shooting. These symptoms may include:

- resisting change or an unwillingness to discuss the issues or try to problem solve
- apathy or lack of motivation
- increased absenteeism
- feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, or worried
- negative feelings toward leadership
- conflict among members of the group

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Phases of Compassion Fatigue

There are six approximate phases of compassion fatigue. Like stages of grief, individual experiences vary widely. Some people may spend more or less time in a particular phase, skip a phase, or bounce between phases. Being able to identify and acknowledge where you are can help you focus on what you need to move forward. The six phases include:

Zealot

During this phase, a person might feel excited, full of energy, committed, focused, productive, motivated, and enthusiastic about helping and being a part of the change.

Irritability

During this phase, a person might feel avoidant or lack focus and motivation. They may decrease their self-care, lack of patience, or tend to complain.

Withdrawal

During this phase, a person may feel isolated, defensive, hopeless, or exhausted.

Zombie

During this phase, a person may feel decreased compassion or they may have feelings of being on autopilot, short-tempered, or less trusting in the skills and abilities of others.

Pathology and Victimization

During this phase, a person may have increased absenteeism or may over or under eating, have sleep issues, or thoughts of leaving the profession.

Maturation and Renewal

During this phase, a person is more likely to acknowledge their struggles and focus on building strength and resilience.

To help recognize symptoms and needs, there are free tools to self-assess compassion fatigue including the Professional Quality of Life Scale (PROQOL) that focuses on your compassion satisfaction, burnout, or secondary trauma. (proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English_Self-Score_3-2012.pdf) Completing this assessment can help you determine your areas of strength to lean on and areas of improvement to build on to promote resilience.

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Strategies to Make a Comeback from Compassion Fatigue

Strategies for compassion fatigue are not unlike those for people experiencing first-hand trauma. Before you can help others, you need to focus on your own needs and take care of yourself. This will make you stronger and more resilient and will make you better at helping others, showing empathy, and having compassion for those experiencing trauma. Here are a few strategies to help you return to a place of focus, hope, and motivation.

Collect Your Thoughts

Assess where you are and what you need. You can do a self-assessment such as the PROQOL or just write down your strengths and challenges and what symptoms you may be experiencing.

Own It

Resist denial and strive to accept your emotions (positive and negative). Having compassion fatigue does not mean that you are not doing a good job. It is normal.

Make a Plan

Think about what you can do to address your challenging thoughts and behaviors or what you can do to help yourself on the road to recovery.

Engage Your Support System

Chances are that you are not the only person experiencing symptoms of burnout or compassion fatigue. Reach out to your colleagues – give them support and listen to their concerns. Work together to determine strategies for maintaining a balance between your work needs and your needs.

Be Mindful

Focus on the present and work on grounding yourself. Practice deep breathing, mindful meditation, yoga, or stretching. Step outside for fresh air when you can. Close your eyes and listen to music, write poetry, or write in a journal.

Accept and Let Go

Understand what is in your control and what you can't control. Do what you can and let go of the rest. Focus on what you can do each day and try to avoid worrying about things that you cannot change.

Care for Yourself

Take care of yourself before taking care of others. Take time for yourself. Find time to read a book, watch a movie, go for a walk, engage in the arts, exercise, play sports, etc. Give yourself time to listen to music, take a bath, enjoy a meal, work in the garden, go to the beach, etc.

Keep Believing

Remain hopeful, grateful, and optimistic. Focus on accomplishments and progress. Know that you are making a difference. Remind yourself that you are strong and that you are helping many people.