



Compassion fatigue

Awareness for helping professionals



Working in a “helping profession,” such as medicine, emergency response, social work, hospice, law enforcement, education, and others, offers great rewards, but can also take a toll. Along with the stress of budget cuts and shrinking resources, these challenging jobs bring a unique stressor – the ongoing, daily need to provide care. In addition to these demands, helping professionals may have to regularly manage exposure to trauma and grief. One’s capacity for compassion and empathy can feel stretched or used up. This is called compassion fatigue.

What is compassion fatigue?

It is physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion that changes a person’s ability to feel happy or to care for others. Compassion fatigue occurs regularly in all types of helping professions, as well as being a factor for family caregivers. Compassion fatigue can feel like a normal consequence of caring for suffering or traumatized populations. Often the compassionate caregiver responds to this exhaustion by working harder and trying to invest more of themselves. Recognizing the signs early on is a key first step in preventing or reduce compassion fatigue.

Common signs that may point to compassion fatigue	
Chronic anger, cynicism	Excessive blaming of outside forces
Depression	Chronic mental and/or physical fatigue
Physical complaints, such as aches and pains	Irritability, easily triggered emotions
Inability to feel joy or pleasure	Unhealthy eating habits
Trouble sleeping	Overly high expectations of yourself
Never taking time off or time for yourself	Difficulty with attention/concentration
Self-doubt, low self-esteem	Distrust, sarcasm and/or negative humor
Reduced sense of purpose	Alcohol and/or drug misuse
Reduced work performance	Increase in compulsive behaviors

Factors that contribute to compassion fatigue

- + Ongoing exposure to suffering or acute trauma as part of the work day
- + Growing demands, such as larger caseloads, more patients, and longer shifts
- + Fewer resources available to both the helper and the person being helped
- + Blurred emotional boundaries between knowing how someone feels and taking on their feelings
- + Caring for others (patients, coworkers and even your company) at your own expense
- + Tendency to put your own needs aside because there’s not enough time in the day

Perspectives that can contribute to compassion fatigue

Certain mindsets can also be factors. Ask yourself:

- + Do you feel like your needs are secondary to those of others?
- + Does it seem selfish to take care of yourself?
- + Do you feel like you always fall short and can't seem to make a difference?
- + Do you often feel like poor outcomes are your fault?
- + Do you believe if you work harder you can be a better caring professional?
- + Do you believe that stress is just part of the job and that you should be able to handle it?
- + Does it seem like everything will fall apart if you're not on the job?
- + Do you avoid taking time off because you feel you need to be at work?

Self-care strategies

It's important that you take care of yourself in healthy ways, so you can stay strong and well.

- + Take care of your physical and emotional needs:
 - o Get enough sleep to wake up feeling well-rested.
 - o Find physical activities you enjoy in order to stay motivated.
 - o Don't let eating right be an afterthought. Stock healthy foods. Eat regular meals as you are able.
 - o Try to take your breaks, even if it is just a few minutes out of the busy day.
 - o During your time off, let yourself be a priority. Try to do things that help you relax and recharge.
 - o Practice techniques such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation, and guided imagery to reduce stress.
- + Notice your emotional boundaries on the job. Strive for an empathetic, but balanced level of emotional involvement.
- + Work on developing realistic expectations about your job. Accept that there will be things you can't control or fix.
- + Don't overlook or ignore issues in your personal life that might add to your stress at work.
- + Use the support of others. Talk out concerns with your coworkers, partner, family or friends. Check out work support groups.
- + You may find yourself re-evaluating your work/ career goals; avoid major decisions in this stressed time.