

RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING COMPASSION FATIGUE



Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, also known as second-hand shock, vicarious trauma and secondary stress reaction, describes a type of stress that results from helping or wanting to help those who are traumatized or under significant emotional duress.

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Signs and Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Each individual will have their own warning signs that indicate that they are moving into the danger zone of compassion fatigue. These will include some of the following:

- ✓ Exhaustion
- ✓ Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- ✓ Anger and irritability
- ✓ Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- ✓ Dread of working with certain clients/patients
- ✓ Diminished sense of enjoyment of career
- ✓ Disruption to world view, heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- ✓ Intrusive imagery or dissociation
- ✓ Hypersensitivity or Insensitivity to emotional material
- ✓ Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- ✓ Absenteeism – missing work, taking many sick days
- ✓ Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients/patients
- ✓ Problems with intimacy and in personal relationships

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How to address Compassion Fatigue

1. GET EDUCATED

If you know you are at risk for compassion fatigue, taking the time to learn the signs and symptoms can be a helpful means of prevention.

2. PRACTICE SELF-CARE

Practicing self-care can be a critical method of protecting yourself against compassion fatigue. It is not uncommon for those who are constantly concerned with the needs of others to wind up neglecting their own.

Those who practice good self-care are significantly less vulnerable to stress and compassion fatigue than those who fail to do so. A good self-care regimen will look different for each person, but it should generally include:

- Balanced, nutritious diet
- Regular exercise
- Routine schedule of restful sleep
- Balance between work and leisure
- Honoring emotional needs

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3. SET EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

It can be especially important for therapists, social workers, nurses, and caregivers alike to set firm emotional boundaries to protect themselves. Empathy and compassion are generally at the forefront of a human services career.

The challenge is to remain compassionate, empathetic, and supportive of others without becoming overly involved and taking on another's pain. Setting emotional boundaries helps maintain a connection while still remembering and honoring the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs.

4. ENGAGE IN OUTSIDE HOBBIES

Maintaining a solid work-life balance can help protect you from compassion fatigue. When all your time is spent working or thinking about work, it can be easy to burn out. Studies have shown work-life balance is becoming more important to workers, and making time for leisure activities and personal hobbies outside of work can help lower stress levels and improve overall life satisfaction.

5. CULTIVATE HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS OUTSIDE OF WORK

While it is great to have strong relationships with your co-workers, it is equally important to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships outside of work. It can sometimes be difficult for co-workers to avoid talking about work even outside the workplace. Connecting with friends who are not aware of the ins and outs of your work situation can provide much needed emotional and professional relief.

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6. KEEP A JOURNAL

Journaling is an excellent way to process and release emotions that may arise from your line of work. Taking the time to cultivate self-awareness and connect with your personal thoughts and feelings can help prevent suppression of emotions, which can lead to compassion fatigue over time.

7. BOOST YOUR RESILIENCY

Resilience is our ability to bounce back from stress. While some people seem to naturally be more resilient than others, resilience is a skill that can be learned and cultivated.

“Resilience can be thought of as the ability to adapt to and become stronger through adversity,” said Marjie L. Roddick, MA, LMHC. “It can be a protective factor against compassion fatigue, so those with higher resiliency are better able to prevent compassion fatigue. Resilience is something that can be learned, and enhancing or boosting it can reduce the effects of compassion fatigue as new coping methods are learned.”

8. USE POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

While it may be tempting to wash away the stress and emotional burdens of your job with alcohol or drugs, this can actually work in the reverse and compound stress in the long run. Consider making a list of positive coping strategies to use in times of stress. This might include deep breathing, meditation, taking a walk, talking with a friend, watching a funny movie, or relaxing in a hot bath.

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9. IDENTIFY WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

Workplace strategies are often an important part of compassion fatigue prevention. If your employer does not currently have any in place, consider suggesting their implementation.

Some workplace strategies that have been proven to be beneficial are:

- Support groups and open discussions about compassion fatigue in the workplace
- Regular breaks
- Routine check-ins
- Mental health days
- Onsite counseling
- Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

10. SEEK PERSONAL THERAPY

If you find yourself feeling emotionally vulnerable, significantly stressed, or overwhelmed, consider seeing a therapist who can help you process your feelings and implement strategies to help you combat compassion fatigue and maintain a healthy work-life balance.