

Combating Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is common among caregivers who spend a significant amount of time working with the seriously ill and traumatized. Compassion fatigue shares many of the same symptoms with burnout, another common issue among caregivers, but burnout, generally indicates a loss of the ability to empathize. Victims of compassion fatigue are overwhelmed by their emotional connection with and compassion for those they aid, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Long-term, untreated compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and other serious stress-related conditions. That's why it's important to recognize, address and treat the causes and symptoms immediately by taking care of your physical and emotional health.

Who is at risk?

Physicians, caregivers and volunteers who help others often are extremely empathic people, and their generous and caring nature may heighten their vulnerability to compassion fatigue. People may be especially vulnerable if they have experienced unresolved trauma in their own lives or are going through an emotional or traumatic event at the same time as the people they are treating.

Compassion fatigue can happen slowly over time, or it can come on suddenly, the U.S. Department of Defense advises on its Military OneSource site for service members, veterans and their families. The signs are similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder but can vary greatly among individuals:

Nervousness and anxiety: You may feel fearful about going out or be hyper-vigilant about your own and your family's safety.

Anger and irritability: You may argue with relatives, friends or co-workers or feel angry for no discernable reason.

Mood swings: Compassion fatigue can make it difficult for you to control your emotions. You may feel fine one minute and then find yourself suddenly crying or feeling very anxious the next.

Difficulty concentrating: Maintaining focus or making even simple decisions may be signs of compassion fatigue. You may forget parts of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.

Changes in appetite, sleep or other habits: You may be eating more or less than usual, or may be sleeping too much or not enough. You also may withdraw from others by becoming emotionally distant and detached.

Physical changes: People suffering from compassion fatigue may experience headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, heart palpitations or shortness of breath. You may notice flu-like or cold symptoms. (If you do have any of these physical changes, see your health care provider to rule out a medical ailment.)

Depression: Feeling sadness and grief, lowered self-esteem or a loss of interest in ordinary activities, memory difficulties, extreme fatigue or frequent crying episodes also are possible signs of compassion fatigue.

Other symptoms cited by mental health professionals include:

- Isolation from others
- Complaints from co-workers or supervisors about work performance
- Substance abuse
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling and sexual addictions
- Poor self-care, including lack of hygiene and unkempt appearance



- Legal problems or indebtedness
- Nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic events
- Difficulty separating work from personal life
- Lack of connection with co-workers and others on the job

Addressing Compassion Fatigue

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, which works to educate healthcare professionals about the issue, such symptoms are normal displays of stress resulting from the work of caregiving. The good news is that, “While the symptoms are often disruptive, depressive, and irritating, an awareness of the symptoms and their negative effect on your life can lead to positive change, personal transformation, and a new resiliency,” the project suggests on its website.

Here are some tips from the project to address compassion fatigue:

- Be kind to yourself.
- Be aware of what you’re experiencing and educate yourself.
- Accept where you are on your path at all times.
- Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate what you’re experiencing. • Listen to others who are suffering.
- Clarify your personal boundaries: What works for you; what doesn’t.
- Express your needs verbally.
- Take positive action to change your environment.



Untreated compassion fatigue can impair your health as well as your work performance. It also can negatively impact your personal and family life. That’s why it’s important to get help promptly if you feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities. Be aware that help is available for the helper and that you are as important as the people you are helping. Some additional tips from the Military OneSource website:

Talk with someone you trust: Just voicing your feelings and fears can help you feel more in control and less alone. A supervisor, mentor or trusted colleague can remind you of what’s typical and can help you anticipate challenges that may lie ahead.

Take care of yourself: Eat well-balanced meals, get enough sleep and make time to exercise, even if you only take a few minutes for a short walk. Practice deep breathing and other relaxation techniques. Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to help you manage your emotions.

Give yourself time: Compassion fatigue isn’t a sign of weakness. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient with you. Telling people how they can help will make you feel useful and help you get the support you need.

Know your own limits: You may need to stop or change your assignment, even if it’s only temporarily. You can’t be effective if you’re exhausted or know you can’t help. Take time for a well-deserved break. When you return, you may be better able to help others because you have a refreshed attitude, more energy and a different perspective.

Focus on the good you are doing: You are giving the gift of yourself and your experience and training.



If you ever feel overwhelmed, talk with a professional who can suggest ways to help others without neglecting your own needs. Your Employee Assistance Program can aid you in finding the counselling and other resources you need to get back to feeling yourself again.

Unrecognized and untreated compassion fatigue causes people to leave their profession, fall into the throws of addictions or in extreme cases become self-destructive or suicidal, warns Angelea Panos, a therapist and board member of Gift From Within, a nonprofit organization for survivors of trauma and victimization. “It is important that we all understand this phenomenon for our own well-being, but also for our colleagues,” she writes on the Gift From Within website. “If you notice a colleague in distress, reach out to them... and let them know you care and are available to talk if they need.”

Resources

- Gift From Within: www.giftfromwithin.org
- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: www.compassionfatigue.org
- Military OneSource: www.militaryonesource.mil
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov

