

Understanding Compassion Fatigue



Awareness is the first step to prevent and minimize the effects of compassion fatigue.

What is compassion fatigue?

“Compassion fatigue has often been described as the “cost of caring” for those in emotional or physical pain”¹ resulting from the extension of care or safety to others in need. Those who experience compassion fatigue often feel deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a pronounced change in their ability to feel empathy for their patients, loved ones and co-workers. Often marked by increased cynicism and decreased enjoyment at work, the combination of factors may eventually transform into a depressive state, secondary traumatic stress, and stress-related illnesses.² Individuals in professions such as first responders, veterinary medicine, law, or medical-based careers are at highest risk of experiencing compassion fatigue.

So how does one know if they are experiencing compassion fatigue, and what are the steps that can be taken to minimize the symptoms?

Those who experience compassion fatigue often have these symptoms:

- Chronic physical and emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of inequity toward the therapeutic or caregiver relationship
- Feelings of self-contempt
- Headaches
- Irritability
- Poor job satisfaction
- Weight loss

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Some methods to minimize compassion fatigue are:³

- 1. Boost your resiliency.** Resilience is the ability to bounce back from stress. While some individuals have a natural resiliency, others have to learn and cultivate the skill. Practicing mindful meditation, positive thinking, and humour can help build resiliency for the more stressful and emotionally draining situations.
- 2. Cultivate healthy friendships outside of work.** As important as the relationships we develop with co-workers, it is equally important to build and maintain relationships outside of work. Co-workers can sometimes have difficulty extending conversations beyond the 'office', which does not allow one to get the emotional and professional relief needed through everyday conversations. Building healthy relationships with those outside work can help you disconnect and provide needed relaxation and recreation.
- 3. Engage in hobbies.** Maintaining a work-life balance can help minimize compassion fatigue. When our preoccupation with work begins to encompass the majority of each day and extends beyond working hours, it can increase the odds of burnout. Having hobbies or leisure activities outside of work can help lower stress levels and improve overall life satisfaction.
- 4. Get educated.** If your profession is at high risk of experiencing compassion fatigue, it is important to be educated on the signs and symptoms to minimize the prevalence of experiencing compassion fatigue.
- 5. Identify workplace strategies.** Workplace strategies are an important part of minimizing the risk of compassion fatigue. Look for possibilities in your work environment - consider regularly scheduled breaks, support groups, routine check-ins, mental health days, onsite counselling, and relaxation rooms. The National Standard of Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace is also a great resource for developing workplace strategies around mental health for employees.
- 6. Keep a journal.** Journaling is a great way to process and release emotions that may arise from work and life. It helps to cultivate self-awareness and connect with thoughts and feelings. This can help prevent bottling up of emotions which can lead to compassion fatigue over time.
- 7. Practice optimism and gratitude.** Looking at the positive things that are going on in one's life can help minimize compassion fatigue symptoms. Taking time each day to think about the positive things to come and what good things are occurring are important to maintaining greater happiness. Practicing positive thinking can help maintain a happier life.
- 8. Practice self-care.** Self-care is critical in protecting one's self against compassion fatigue. It is not uncommon for those who are constantly concerned for the needs of others to neglect their own. Maintaining a balanced diet, exercising regularly, having a proper sleep schedule, practicing work-life balance, and honouring your emotions can all help to minimize the impact of compassion fatigue.
- 9. Use positive coping strategies.** Using positive coping strategies, such as meditation, taking breaks at work, or talking to a friend, can help you cope with the stressful times. Stay clear from alcohol or drugs as it increases stress in the body and mind, resulting in the opposite of the desired effect and increases your chances of experiencing compassion fatigue.
- 10. Seek personal therapy.** If you find you are feeling emotionally vulnerable, significantly stressed, or overwhelmed, consider speaking to a qualified medical practitioner who can help you process your feelings and provide strategies to help you combat compassion fatigue and develop a healthy work-life balance.

Sources:

1. Figley, C.R. (Ed.). (1995) *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
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3. Staff, G. (2017, August 30). *The Cost of Caring: 10 Ways to Prevent Compassion Fatigue*. Retrieved November 16, 2017, from <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/the-cost-of-caring-10-ways-to-prevent-compassion-fatigue-0209167>

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