

Compassion Fatigue: Healing the Healer

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Compassion fatigue is deep physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion that can result from working day-to-day in a care giving environment. The natural response to this downward spiral is to work harder until there is nothing left to give, which is counter to the adaptive response of taking a break. The symptoms are the same as those of chronic stress and are a consequence of caring for the needs of others before caring for your own needs.

Compassion fatigue results from a lack of daily self-care practices that create opportunities for you to reflect, refuel, and rejuvenate. The good news is that feeling compassion fatigue is a sign that you are a deeply caring person. When we care for ourselves, we can care for others from a place of abundance not scarcity. With development of healthy self-care routines, you can continue to successfully provide compassionate care to others.

Recognize the Signs of Compassion Fatigue

Signs of compassion fatigue: abuse of drugs, alcohol, food or sex; anger; blaming; depression; decreased sense of accomplishment; difficulty concentrating; exhaustion; headaches; gastrointestinal upset; hopelessness; hypertension; irritability; isolation from others; less ability to feel joy; low self-esteem; receiving and voicing complaints; sleep disturbances; and workaholism.

Create a Self-Care Plan

Recognizing the signs of compassion fatigue is the first step towards positive change and the second step is making a daily firm commitment to choices that lead to resiliency. Below are some suggestions to create a self-care plan:

- **Listen deeply to others and seek out others to listen to you.** Express your thoughts and feelings and create a safe and supportive environment for others to share. Keep an open mind and heart. Connecting with others often gives the replenishment you need. Find meaning in daily practice and interactions. Take time to appreciate the emotional gifts that you receive from your clients and patients each day.
- **Clarify your boundaries.** Define what gives your life joy and meaning and use these principles as a compass to stay on course. Reserve your energy for important causes and choose your battles. Share the workload with others. Remind yourself that it is okay to say no. Recognize when you need help and ask for assistance. Be aware of your own high standards and expectations of self.
- **Incorporate stress-relieving activities** into your daily routine, such as exercise, meditation, massage, yoga, deep breathing, taking a bath, reading a book or sitting in silence.

- **Take good care of yourself.** Eat nourishing food including a diet rich in complex carbohydrates, fresh fruits and vegetables, and healthy fats. Be mindful of consuming junk food, sugar and caffeine. Drink plenty of water. Establish a regular sleep schedule.
- **Choose a proactive versus reactive approach.** Allow yourself to think through a situation before responding. Take time to fully consider the advantages and disadvantages. Ask yourself “how will this align with my values and priorities?” Sleep on it overnight to create distance and gain a larger perspective. Look at the situation from another’s point of view.
- **Invite humor into everyday.** Smile, laugh, and be playful. Sing and dance. Watch a comedy, go to a party, attend a concert, or buy tickets to a performance. Be able to laugh at your foibles.
- **Practice appreciation.** Express thanks daily to those around you. Find something to be grateful for on a daily basis – record it in a journal or make it a daily practice to start off your day.
- **Be kind, caring, and forgiving of yourself.** Get back in touch with yourself through reflection or meditation. Be accepting of relapses – they are normal in implementing change.
- **Take time off to re-energize yourself.** Take a break from what you are doing. Plan regular vacations. Eat your lunch away from your desk. Enjoy a walk during lunch time.
- **Have a life outside of work.** Spend time with your family. Maintain your hobbies. Make plans to socialize. Sustain your interests. Schedule time to attend to these activities.
- **Seek out support.** It helps to talk to someone who understands compassion fatigue, who is a good listener and with whom you feel safe and supported. This person(s) could be a colleague, professional counselor, support group, pastor, spouse, or friend.

When you are exhausted, adding these self-care activities into your life initially may seem overwhelming. Take baby steps by adding one at a time. As you start reaping the benefits, you will be able to take on more. You will slowly come back to yourself, feel more energetic and find satisfaction and fulfillment in your work once again. If you are not realizing progress, seek out professional support to assist you in getting back on track. It is vital to care for yourself, so that you can continue to care for others.

Related Websites

- [Argus Institute](#): Offers a variety of resources to assist you in guiding your clients through the process of euthanasia and assist them in their grief.
- [Compassion Fatigue](#)

References

1. www.compassionfatigue.org
2. Pfifferling JH, Gilley K. Overcoming Compassion Fatigue. Family Practice Management. April. 39-44. 2000.
3. Figley CR, Roon RG. Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community. Human Society Press. Washington, DC. 2006.