



When helping becomes a burden

Compassion fatigue in the midst of a pandemic.

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Scope

- What is compassion fatigue?
- The signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue
- What makes an individual more vulnerable for compassion fatigues
- Strategies to prevent and address compassion fatigue



What is compassion fatigue?

- The emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequence of a traumatic event(s).
- Differs from 'Burnout' which is the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress, not trauma-related.
- Compassion fatigue and burnout can co-exist
- Also called, vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization

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What is compassion fatigue (2)

“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we often hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.”

(C. Figley, 1995)

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The signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue

- Feeling burdened by the suffering of others
- Blaming others for their suffering (Cynicism)
- Faking empathy, feeling apathy
- Isolating yourself
- Loss of pleasure in life
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia
- Bottling up emotions
- Increased friction and arguments with others
- Physical and mental fatigue
- Increased nightmares
- Feeling hopelessness and powerlessness
- Feeling guilt
- Frequent complaining about your work and your life – lack of fulfilment
- Overeating
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol
- Poor self-care
- Beginning to receive a lot of complaints about your work or attitude
- Denial
- Struggle to separate the professional from the personal

What makes you more vulnerable for compassion fatigue?

- Denial: is one of the more detrimental symptoms
- Denial prevents those who are experiencing compassion fatigue from accurately assessing how fatigued and stressed they actually are, which prevents them from seeking help.



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Strategies to prevent and address compassion fatigue

- Take care of basic needs.
 - Sleep, eat, move. Focus on getting enough and good sleep. Eat well nutritionally.
 - Movement is important for the somatic processing of unsettling emotions, stress and trauma.
 - Consistency of routine – set some kind of routine to follow daily.
 - Incorporate non-professional activities, such as hobbies and interests into your routine

Strategies continue...

- Establish community.
 - Being conscious about connecting to community confronts isolation.
 - Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you.
 - Community could be family, friends, peers in your profession, supervision, etc.



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Strategies continue...

- Self-awareness
 - ‘Bearing witness to another person’s suffering ignites things within ourselves’ (American Psychological Association, 2020)
 - Resilience is improved by self-awareness.
 - Reduce chronic stress.
 - Know the signs of compassion fatigue.
 - Be mindful of trauma exposure.
 - Be mindful that consistent exposure to trauma wears individuals down and prevents them from restoring barriers to protect themselves. Be conscious of your boundaries and what you can and cannot do for others.
 - Learn how to express what you need verbally.
 - Remember that self-compassion is not selfish. Be kind to yourself.
 - Practice meditation, mindfulness, gratitude and the celebration of small victories.

Closing thoughts....

- Hope....compassion fatigue is not terminal, although it will certainly impact on your quality of life.
- Self-awareness is key to understanding and addressing compassion fatigue.



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Questions

