

## Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

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You are physically and emotionally drained, are apathetic, have an unshakeable negative attitude, and are no longer satisfied with your job. You may have felt like this before, but were able to recharge your battery by taking a break. Not this time. So, what's going on? You may have compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is the slow loss of empathy for others over time due to emotional and physical overload.

Those in the health care and mental health professions are the most susceptible. Yet, anyone who expends great emotional energy day in and day out can be affected. This can include law enforcement, rescue and fire personnel, clergy, social service workers, and personal caregivers. As well, customer service representatives, who hear accounts of personal loss and tragedy from customers who cannot pay their bills, can also get compassion fatigue.

### Burnout and secondary trauma stress

Compassion fatigue takes time to develop—weeks, months, or even years. It includes *burnout* and *secondary trauma stress*.

*Burnout* is frustration and exhaustion stemming from a highly stressful workload and/or a non-supportive work environment.

*Secondary trauma stress* is work-related, indirect exposure to very stressful events such as working with child abuse survivors, treating war-related casualties and responding to disasters. It often starts soon after exposure to another person's specific traumatic event, but it can also be cumulative with repeated exposure to others' traumatic situations. Symptoms include:

- Diminished ability to feel empathy for others
- Emotional numbness
- Apathy, low motivation
- Loss of joy or satisfaction in normal activities
- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Self-doubt, feelings of incompetence, hopelessness A negative attitude
- Working on "auto-pilot"
- Reduced productivity
- Poor self-care

## Take care of yourself

The first steps to fighting compassion fatigue are to acknowledge it and make a pledge to healing yourself. Refocus on yourself. In order to tend to and be sensitive to others' needs, you must take care of your own well-being. Here are some suggestions:

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet.
- Maintain a regular exercise routine.
- Don't use drugs and alcohol to cope.
- Learn to recognize your limits, both as a person and as a professional.
- Learn to set limits with others.
- Pray, meditate, or relax daily.
- Focus on what you do well.
- Do something pleasurable each day.
- Learn to "switch" on and off—leave work at work.
- Seek out support from others.

Learn to recognize when to ask for help. While those working in helping professions are usually willing to help others, they often neglect their own limits. Be aware of when the compassion fatigue has evolved into a more serious condition, such as depression or anxiety, and seek the appropriate professional help. Strive for balance by engaging in satisfying personal life activities to fight work stress.

Preventing compassion fatigue is the key. It is much easier to stop it from occurring in the first place than it is to fix things once it sets in. The goal is to maintain your resilience so that you can keep doing your work with professionalism, energy, and compassion.

If you are struggling with compassion fatigue, seek help from a mental health professional or call the toll-free number on this site.

## Resources

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project

*To Weep for a Stranger* by Patricia Smith. CreateSpace, 2009.

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