

# Tip Sheet: Compassion Fatigue

## What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people in physical or emotional distress. It is a state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.

Caring too much can hurt. When caregivers focus on others without practicing self-care, unhealthy or destructive behaviors can surface. Apathy, isolation, bottled up emotions and substance abuse head a long list of symptoms associated with the secondary traumatic stress disorder commonly referred to as compassion fatigue.

While the effects of Compassion Fatigue can cause pain and suffering, learning to recognize and manage its symptoms is the first step toward healing. By not ignoring the signs of compassion fatigue and taking steps to manage stress, helping professionals can continue to provide healthy, compassionate care to those they serve, while remaining happy and productive in their personal and professional lives.

## Signs of Compassion Fatigue

To recognize compassion fatigue, it is important to pay attention to what our bodies are telling us. Stress can manifest itself in physical, psychological, and emotional ways. Listed below are some common reactions to stress:

### Physical

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Muscle tremors/spasms
- Ulcers
- Difficulty breathing
- Rapid breathing
- Elevated Blood Pressure
- Headaches
- Chest pain
- Nausea/vomiting
- Changes in appetite
- Dizziness

### Emotional

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Grief
- Denial
- Apathy/Boredom
- Emotional numbness
- Depression
- Lack of enjoyment
- Irritability
- Mistrust
- Confusion
- Feeling overwhelmed

### Psychological/Behavioral

- Difficulty with concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Poor problem-solving
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks

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- Blaming others
- Withdrawn
- Moody/emotional outbursts
- Eating more/less
- Hyper-vigilant
- Restless
- Sleeping more/less
- Change in sex drive
- Use of drugs/alcohol

### Managing Stress and Compassion Fatigue

Managing stress and coping with compassion fatigue is not difficult, but it requires making your own well-being a priority. There are many things you can do to reduce stress. Listed below are some techniques that you may find helpful as you practice ways of coping:

**Get support from people you love and trust.** Talking with people you feel safe with can help you process and feel more in control. If you have a supervisor, mentor, or trusted colleague, they will be able to remind you of what typical responses are under these circumstances. They may also be able to help you be aware of certain challenges that may lie ahead.

**Try not to compare yourself with others.** Everyone reacts differently to exposure to others' suffering or traumatic experiences. There is no right or wrong way to deal with these events.

**Set more boundaries during this stressful time.** Say no when you can. Setting limits in your personal and professional life can help you conserve your energy and allow you time to regroup. By doing this, you will be able to keep things in better perspective. It is also important to be able to balance your time alone and the time you spend with supportive people.

**Avoid using alcohol or nonprescription drugs to handle your emotions or to relax.** Alcohol is a depressant and can make you feel more lethargic. Sugar, caffeine, and smoking can have an over-stimulating effect.

**Take care of yourself.** Eat well-balanced meals and make a point of getting enough sleep. Keep a bottle of water with you – it is easy to become dehydrated when you are under stress.

**Exercise.** Daily exercise can have tremendous benefits for both the body and mind. Even short walks can help if you take them regularly.

**Practice deep breathing.** Take breaks several times a day to breathe in slowly to a count of five, and out again to a count of five. This can help “unclench” both your body and mind.

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**Try to make your work area as comfortable and soothing as possible.** Surroundings can make a difference in how you feel. If you have a work space, make sure your chair is comfortable or that you have a soothing photograph or other picture to look at.

**Write down your feelings.** Some people find that it helps to write down their feelings, especially before they go to bed. You can then decide whether or not you want to share these thoughts and feelings with anyone else.

**Consider joining a support group.** Talking with other professionals who are dealing with similar experiences can be helpful, especially if you don't have supportive friends and family nearby.

**Balance objectivity and empathy.** If you become overly objective, you may come across as very detached or feel numb, and may not be able to help your patient or client. If you become overly empathetic, you may cry or become outraged, which may lead the patient or client to feel that you are unable to help them. Therefore, maintaining a healthy balance is of the utmost importance.

**Give yourself time.** It's not a sign of personal weakness if you are experiencing compassion fatigue. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient with you. Telling people how they can help you will enable them to feel useful and will help you get what you actually need.

**Know and honor your own limitations.** There are moments when everyone needs a break. Take one before you need to. You won't be able to help others if you're too exhausted.

**Remember to focus on the powerful impact you're having on the people you're helping.** You are giving the gift of yourself. Take time for a well-deserved break, if needed. When you return, you may be better able to help others with your refreshed attitude and by having more energy and a different perspective. Treat yourself the way you treat your own patients or clients - with compassion, empathy, and understanding, and you and everyone you come in contact with will greatly benefit.

**Seek professional help if you are not yourself.** It's important to seek professional help right away if you are experiencing overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, or despair, if you feel like quitting your job immediately, or if you are having thoughts of suicide. There is treatment for compassion fatigue, and talking with a professional can help. Calling your EAP is a great place to start. If you are arguing with people, having trouble getting along with others, or are feeling more aggressive, irritable, or frustrated than usual, seek help. Seek help if you are having trouble functioning well at work or at home, or if your personal relationships are suffering. Seek help if you are drinking more, abusing drugs, can't sleep, or if you just "don't know what's wrong."