



Compassion Fatigue: You Can't Pour From an Empty Cup

What is Compassion Fatigue, you ask?

It amounts to the "cost of caring." Per the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 90% of individuals receiving care in public healthcare settings have experienced trauma. In addition, those admitted to state psychiatric hospitals are also attempting to manage a plethora of complicated medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial stressors. They require our attention, support, and expertise under extremely challenging circumstances. When we give of ourselves to others over an extended period of time, we may become physically and psychologically exhausted, making it difficult to continue to empathize with and show compassion for those we have pledged to help. Some researchers refer to this level of fatigue as "secondary traumatic stress." Figley (1995) considers compassion fatigue a natural response or reaction to working with individuals or groups of people who are in crisis. This response can have a significant impact on us, and healthcare employers are becoming more concerned about the level of stress we experience as a result of continued exposure to crisis situations (Jacobson, 2006).

How do I know if I have Compassion Fatigue?

It is important to identify some of the early warning signs of compassion fatigue so you can get help and support as quickly as possible. Some examples include:

- Chronic physical and emotional exhaustion
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Headaches
- Sleep Disturbance
- Feelings of self-Contempt
- Disturbance in appetite
- Low motivation and energy

There are also assessment tools, such as the Compassion Fatigue Self Test (Figley, 1995), specifically designed to measure compassion fatigue. This instrument asks respondents to indicate how frequently a particular characteristic is true of themselves or their situations. Based on scores, a respondent will get a sense of their risk of compassion fatigue, which includes scores indicating levels of burnout. If you are interested in getting a sense of your risk for burnout, Dr. Charles Figley also recommends a free on-line test that helps you determine the degree to which you are at risk. It may be downloaded and freely used with author permissions at https://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html.

What can I do about it?

Making use of healthy coping skills, or the methods we can use to effectively manage our reactions to stressful situations, is important when faced with prolonged periods of stress. We can focus on coping skills that focus on problem-solving and/or emotional regulation. Unmanaged stress may result in a number of physical and emotional concerns and can ultimately lead to poor work performance. Compassion fatigue is an occupational hazard that requires monitoring because symptoms and reactions can become so severe that clinical effectiveness and personal health may become compromised. It is important to identify ways to think about situations, our behavior in those situations, and ways to relieve the pressure that builds when we allow stress to go unmanaged for too long. Think about healthy things you can do that bring you enjoyment and result in decreased levels of stress. Some examples include:

- Taking a walk
- Listening to music
- Reading a book
- Spending time with friends/family
- Exercising
- Drawing/Coloring
- Meditating
- Taking a vacation
- Reading a book

It is also helpful to change that "stinkin' thinkin'" and combat those negative (and sometimes intrusive) thoughts that keep us in a funk by challenging them and asking yourself if you have evidence to support their validity. For example, replace the thought "They will never get better no matter how hard I try!" with "My goal is to help the individuals I serve to be their best self and to achieve goals important to them. I can only control the part I play in their recovery."

Importantly, take time to relax, relate, and release! Use our Employee Assistance Program (<https://www.dhrm.virginia.gov/employeebenefits/employee-assistance>) if you want or need extra support. Take advantage of the programs available to you because you simply cannot pour from an empty cup!

Source: Azure Baron, Psy.D. ,CSOTP

References:

- Center for Integrated Health Solutions. Trauma. Retrieved February 28, 2020 from <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma>.
- Figley, C. R. (Ed.) (1995). *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 2015.
- Figley, C. R. (2020). Gift From Within - PTSD Resources for Survivors and Caregivers. Retrieved March 2, 2020 from <https://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/What-iCompassion-Fatigue-Dr-Charles-Figley.html>.
- Jacobson, J. M. (2006): Compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 21:3-4, 133-152.

www.commonhealth.virginia.gov

The contents of the CommonHealth weekly emails may be reprinted from an outside resource in the area of health, safety, and wellness and is intended to provide one or more views on a topic. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth of Virginia, CommonHealth, or any particular agency and are offered for educational purposes. If you have questions or concerns about this article, please email us at wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov