

Tips for Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue can be a serious occupational hazard for those in any kind of helping profession, with a majority of those in the field reporting experiencing at least some degree of it in their lives. This is no surprise, as it is typically those with the most empathy who are the most at risk.

Compassion fatigue is characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion and a profound decrease in the ability to empathize. It is a form of secondary traumatic stress, as the stress occurs as a result of helping or wanting to help those who are in need. It is often referred to as “the cost of caring” for others who are in physical or emotional pain. If left untreated, compassion fatigue not only can affect mental and physical health, but it can also have serious legal and ethical implications when providing therapeutic services to people.

While it is not uncommon to hear compassion fatigue referred to as burnout, the conditions are not the same. Compassion fatigue is more treatable than burnout, but it can be less predictable and may come on suddenly or without much warning, whereas burnout usually develops over time.

Because it can arise so abruptly, it can be important for therapists and others in the helping professions to protect themselves from this condition.

Here are 11 ways to prevent compassion fatigue from happening to you.

1. Get Educated

If you know you are at risk for compassion fatigue, taking the time to learn the signs and symptoms can be a helpful means of prevention. The most common signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue include:

- Chronic exhaustion (emotional, physical, or both)
- Reduced feelings of sympathy or empathy
- Dreading working for or taking care of another and feeling guilty as a result
- Feelings of irritability, anger, or anxiety
- Depersonalization
- Hypersensitivity or complete insensitivity to emotional material
- Feelings of inequity toward the therapeutic or caregiver relationship
- Headaches
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight loss
- Impaired decision-making
- Problems in personal relationships
- Poor work-life balance
- Diminished sense of career fulfillment

Knowing the signs and symptoms and continuing to check in with yourself can help you better prevent and manage compassion fatigue if it arises. Many people find that ranking their level of compassion fatigue on a scale of 1-10 is an effective strategy. For example, a rank of 6 might mean you are declining social invitations due to feeling drained and a 7 might be difficulty sleeping due to excessive worry about someone else's well-being.

Cultivating a high level of self-awareness and understanding of how your 6 differs from your 7 can help you gauge where you are so you can implement necessary strategies to avoid the red zone that would likely be a 9 or 10.

It is not only the work itself that poses a risk, but the person's life conditions as well. For example, someone who is not only taking care of people at work, but also caring for a child or adult family member at home may be even more susceptible to compassion fatigue. If you are currently experiencing increased life stressors at home as well as in the workplace, prevention strategies against compassion fatigue may be important.

2. The Importance of Self Care

Practicing self-care can be a critical method of protecting yourself against compassion fatigue. It is not uncommon for those who are constantly concerned with the needs of others to wind up neglecting their own.

Those who practice good self-care are significantly less vulnerable to stress and compassion fatigue than those who fail to do so. A good self-care regimen will look different for each person, but it should generally include:

- Balanced, nutritious diet
- Regular exercise
- Routine schedule of restful sleep
- Balance between work and leisure
- Honoring emotional needs

Making time for these self-care activities leaves less room for overworking, which can lead to compassion fatigue. Overworking is often at the heart of compassion fatigue and its first cousin: vicarious trauma. Taking the very best care of yourself includes setting limits.

3. Set Emotional Boundaries

It can be especially important for therapists, social workers, nurses, and caregivers alike to set firm emotional boundaries to protect themselves. Empathy and compassion are generally at the forefront of a human services career.

If left untreated, compassion fatigue not only can affect mental and physical health, but it can also have serious legal and ethical implications when providing therapeutic services to people.

The challenge is to remain compassionate, empathetic, and supportive of others without becoming overly involved and taking on another's pain. Setting emotional boundaries helps maintain a connection while still remembering and honoring the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs.

If people in a human services career are exposed to too much trauma, they may begin to feel overwhelmed, and people may feel that overwhelm in different ways. It might manifest as insomnia, overeating, skipping meals, addictive behavior, isolating oneself, depression, anxiety, or anger. We might find ourselves fighting with partners or children, having no patience, feeling exhausted, noticing a lowered libido, unmotivated, and, paradoxically, being less interested in what our clients have to say. Believe it or not, these are all helpful, as they quickly alert us to our depleted state. If we are paying attention and are committed to radical self-care, we can act on this awareness by rebalancing our life. If that is not possible, simply taking short breaks throughout the day to close your eyes, focus on your breath, or put your hands on your heart and send yourself some compassion can all make a big difference.

4. Engage in Outside Hobbies

Maintaining a solid work-life balance can help protect you from compassion fatigue. When all your time is spent working or thinking about work, it can be easy to burn out. Studies have shown work-life balance is becoming more important to workers and making time for leisure activities and personal hobbies outside of work can help lower stress levels and improve overall life satisfaction.

5. Cultivate Healthy Friendships Outside of Work

While it is great to have strong relationships with your co-workers, it is equally important to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships outside of work. It can sometimes be difficult for co-workers to avoid talking about work even outside the workplace. Connecting with friends who are not aware of the ins and outs of your work situation can provide much needed emotional and professional relief.

6. Keep a Journal

Journaling is an excellent way to process and release emotions that may arise from your line of work. Taking the time to cultivate self-awareness and connect with your personal thoughts and feelings can help prevent suppression of emotions, which can lead to compassion fatigue over time.

7. Boost Your Resiliency

Resilience is our ability to bounce back from stress. While some people seem to naturally be more resilient than others, resilience is a skill that can be learned and cultivated. Resilience can be thought of as the ability to adapt to and become stronger through adversity. It can be a protective factor against compassion fatigue, so those with higher resiliency are better able to prevent compassion fatigue. Resilience is something that can be learned and enhancing or boosting it can reduce the effects of compassion fatigue as new coping methods are learned.

8. Use Positive Coping Strategies

While it may be tempting to wash away the stress and emotional burdens of your job with alcohol or drugs, this can actually work in the reverse and compound stress in the long run. Consider making a list of positive coping strategies to use in times of stress. This might include deep breathing, meditation, taking a walk, talking with a friend, watching a funny movie, or relaxing in a hot bath.

9. Identify Workplace Strategies

Workplace strategies are often an important part of compassion fatigue prevention. If your employer does not currently have any in place, consider suggesting their implementation.

Some workplace strategies that have been proven to be beneficial are:

- Support groups and open discussions about compassion fatigue in the workplace
- Regular breaks
- Routine check-ins
- Mental health days
- Onsite counseling
- Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

10. Call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

If you find yourself feeling emotionally vulnerable, significantly stressed, or overwhelmed, consider calling your EAP who can help you process your feelings and implement strategies to help you combat compassion fatigue and maintain a healthy work-life balance.