

Combating Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is common among caregivers who spend a significant amount of time working with the seriously ill and traumatized. Compassion fatigue shares many of the same symptoms with burnout, another common issue among caregivers, but burnout, generally indicates a loss of the ability to empathize. Victims of compassion fatigue are overwhelmed by their emotional connection with and compassion for those they aid.

Who is at risk?

Physicians, caregivers and volunteers who help others often are extremely empathic people, and their generous and caring nature may heighten their vulnerability to compassion fatigue. People may be especially vulnerable if they have experienced unresolved trauma in their own lives or are going through an emotional or traumatic event at the same time as the people they are treating.

Compassion fatigue can happen slowly over time, or it can come on suddenly. The signs include:

Nervousness and anxiety: You may feel fearful about going out or be hyper-vigilant about your own and your family's safety.

Anger and irritability: You may argue with relatives, friends or co-workers or feel angry for no reason.

Mood swings: You may feel fine one minute and then find yourself suddenly crying or feeling very anxious the next.

Difficulty concentrating: Maintaining focus or making even simple decisions may become difficult. You may even forget parts of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.

Changes in appetite, sleep or other habits: You may be eating more or less than usual, or may be sleeping too much or not enough. You also may withdraw from others by becoming emotionally distant and detached.

Physical changes: You may experience headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, heart palpitations or shortness of breath. You may notice flu-like or cold symptoms. (If you do have any of these physical changes, see your health care provider to rule out a medical ailment.)

Depression: Feeling sadness and grief, lowered self-esteem or a loss of interest in ordinary activities, memory difficulties, extreme fatigue or frequent crying episodes also are possible signs of compassion fatigue.

Addressing Compassion Fatigue

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, which works to educate healthcare professionals about the issue, such symptoms are normal displays of stress resulting from the work of caregiving. Here are some tips from the project to address compassion fatigue:

- Be kind to yourself.
- Be aware of what you're experiencing and educate yourself.
- Accept where you are on your path at all times.
- Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate what you're experiencing.
- Listen to others who are suffering.
- Clarify your personal boundaries: What works for you; what doesn't.
- Express your needs verbally.
- Take positive action to change your environment.
- Know your limits: You may need to stop or change your assignment, if only temporarily.
- Focus on the good you are doing.

Resilience in Stressful Times

Keep in mind that stress doesn't always get better on its own. You may have to actively work on it, especially if the stress you have been facing is prolonged or intense. The following stress management techniques may help:

- **Scale back:** While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can cut back on or delegate to someone else.
- **Prepare:** If you are feeling edgy already, try to stay ahead of additional stress by preparing for meetings or trips, scheduling your time better, and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. Stress mounts when you run short on time, so build a cushion into your schedule for traffic jams or slow public transportation, for example.
- **Reach out:** Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, or clergy and spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being.
- **Take up a hobby:** It may seem cliché, but an enjoyable pastime can calm your racing mind and heart rate. Try reading, gardening, crafts, tinkering with electronics, fishing, carpentry or music—things that you don't get competitive or more stressed out about.
- **Relax:** Physical activity, meditation, yoga, massage and other relaxation techniques can help you manage stress.
- **Get enough sleep:** Lack of sleep affects your immune system and your judgment and makes you more likely to snap over minor irritations. Most people need seven to eight hours a day.
- **Avoid alcohol and caffeine:** While momentarily calming, both can contribute to stress and anxiety.
- **Get professional help:** If your stress management efforts aren't helpful enough, see your doctor or contact your Employee Assistance Program. Chronic, uncontrolled stress can lead to a variety of potentially serious health problems, including depression and pain.

Relaxation 101

Try these techniques to help you relax and reduce stress:

- **Breathing exercises:** Drawing slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm (the spot just under your ribcage) promotes a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide than chest or shoulder breathing. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this while lying on your back.
- **Yoga and stretching exercises:** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Meditation and imagery techniques:** By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly. Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; alternatively, let your mind go blank. Do not fight stressful thoughts. Instead, think of these thoughts as floating in one ear and out the other and being replaced in your mind by calmer images.
- **Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques:** These involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. For example, make a fist and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand, and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, limbs, etc.



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