

Compassion Fatigue, Symptoms and Strategies

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly created new and heightened stressors for healthcare workers that have the potential to disrupt their psychological and emotional well-being.

This information* may be helpful to assess if you are experiencing a condition called “**Compassion Fatigue**”, some ways to avoid it, and to recognize when you (or someone around you) may need help to manage this situation.

Feeling empathy for those you care for may seem like a given, and may be the reason you're doing what you do. However, this empathy can go too far, and may lead you to feel the symptoms of compassion fatigue as you suffer from another person's trauma. **If you are feeling exhausted or numb, crying, or losing sleep because of the people you care for, you may be experiencing compassion fatigue symptoms.**

Compassion fatigue, or vicarious/secondary trauma, is much more serious than general burnout. It can be a caregiver experiencing trauma after witnessing the physical, emotional, or spiritual pain of their patients, families, and/or their own colleagues. Concept pioneers McCann and Pearlman define it as “a process through which the caregiving individual's own internal experience becomes transformed through engagement with the client's trauma” (1990).

Anywhere from 25–50% of healthcare workers** are thought to experience symptoms of compassion fatigue. Everyone from long-term care workers to family caregivers to emergency room nurses may find themselves taking on others' trauma. Those affected are sometimes the last to recognize what's happening and may need family members, friends, or colleagues to help them make the realization.

What are the symptoms?

A study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* notes the following as common symptoms of compassion fatigue:

- Feelings of failure, guilt, self-doubt, sadness, and powerlessness
- Loss of sleep
- Reduced sense of efficacy on the job
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed by obligations
- Apathy and emotional numbness
- Secretive addictions or self-medicating in a variety of ways
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Exhaustion
- Intrusion symptoms in thoughts, dreams, or nightmares
- Bottled-up emotions
- Pessimism

As the symptoms of compassion fatigue closely resemble those of post-traumatic stress disorder, those affected often struggle to function in their day-to-day routines. And if multiple employees in an organization with these symptoms feed negatively off one another, a toxic culture can result.

Who is most at risk?

- **Those new to the field of caregiving.** Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue can happen quickly. New caregivers may be more likely to get overwhelmed by their responsibilities.
- **Those with a history of personal trauma.** Abuse, natural disasters, military experience, the unexpected death of a loved one, accidents, neglect—personal.

* excerpted from Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI), <https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/Compassion-Fatigue-Symptoms>. Originally published in the *Journal of Safe Management of Disruptive and Assaultive Behavior*, Fall 2013. © 2013 CPI.

** Figures from the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, compassionfatigue.org

- **Those who interact with many clients/ patients.** The greater the number of clients, the greater the likelihood that one will be experiencing or have experienced traumas that a caregiver will be exposed to.
- **Those working long hours.** Many human services and health professionals work a great deal of overtime and regularly pull double shifts. Nothing can erode emotional resiliency like sleep deprivation. This also includes those who are caregivers in their personal lives, and do not have the opportunity to "clock out" and leave an emotionally fatiguing situation.
- **Those with a history of experiencing burnout.** Job dissatisfaction built up over time becomes its own form of trauma and increases the likelihood of an individual developing compassion fatigue.
- **Those who have trouble communicating.** People who struggle to express their emotions may find it easier to bottle up the stress of being a caregiver, putting them at greater risk of trauma.
- **Those with inadequate personal support systems.** When people don't have others to lean on and offer support—a significant other, family, friends, neighbors, trusted colleagues, church groups, clubs, even pets—trauma can result.

What can I do about it?

Self-care isn't optional. It's a critical part of ensuring you have enough mental and physical energy to do your best at caring for others. When you do work that emotionally affects you, it's more important than ever to develop strong self-care habits. You may be overflowing with compassion for others, but **spare some of it for yourself! Caregivers need to prioritize their own physical and mental health.**

Make sure to:

- Get enough sleep
- Eat well
- Exercise regularly
- Do activities you enjoy regularly
- Build and maintain a good support system
- Pursue a good work/personal life balance.

These are some actions that organizations have taken to raise awareness and/or help their employees struggling with compassion fatigue.

- Employee Assistance Program (eviCore EAP) (716) 712- 2777 <http://www.palladianeap.com/> Login: EAP
- Crisis Counseling services: access <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/trauma-and-ptsd/ny/buffalohttps> for a list of local therapists who specialize in post-traumatic stress
- Local Mental Health resources: <https://www2.erie.gov/mentalhealth/index.php?q=covid-19-resources-0>
- Jewish Family Services provides no-cost brief counseling for WNY frontline workers, (716) 883-1914 or generalinfo@jfsbuffalo.org
- Corporate wellness programs/committees

Additional resources

- [The Ten Laws Governing Healthy Caregiving](#), along with other resources at the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#), can serve as mantras to reframe situations from trauma to empowerment.
- If you want to learn more about this topic and help raise awareness among your colleagues about it, listen to a podcast episode about surviving vicarious trauma. <https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/September-2015/Unrestrained-Episode-20-Guest-Laurie-Barkin>
- Also listen to Patricia Smith share her story of compassion fatigue, and her path to recovery. <https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/Compassion-Fatigue-Symptoms>

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