



Compassion Fatigue – Information for Managers

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Caring too much can hurt. When people in the helping professions (human or animal welfare) focus on others without practicing authentic, ongoing self-care, destructive patterns and behaviors can surface, and compassion fatigue can set in. **Compassion fatigue is a deep physical, mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion accompanied by emotional pain.** Studies confirm that people working in the helping professions play host to a high level of compassion fatigue, and often find themselves doing more and more, finding it difficult to maintain the balance between empathy and objectivity. Day in, day out, workers struggle to function in care giving environments that constantly present heart wrenching, emotional challenges. Affecting positive change in society, a mission so vital to those passionate about caring for others, can be perceived as elusive, if not impossible. This painful reality, coupled with first-hand knowledge of society's flagrant disregard for the safety and well being of the feeble and frail (people or animals), takes its toll on everyone from full time employees to part time volunteers. Eventually, negative attitudes can prevail.

Simple Self-Assessment for Compassion Fatigue

Answering "yes" or "no" to the following nine statements will help you assess your risk for compassion fatigue:

| | | |
|--|-----|----|
| Personal concerns commonly intrude on my work role. | Yes | No |
| My colleagues seem to lack understanding. | Yes | No |
| I find even small changes enormously draining. | Yes | No |
| I can't seem to recover quickly after association with trauma. | Yes | No |
| Association with trauma affects me very deeply. | Yes | No |
| The stress of those I'm working with affects me deeply. | Yes | No |
| I have lost my sense of hopefulness. | Yes | No |
| I feel vulnerable all the time. | Yes | No |
| I feel overwhelmed by unfinished personal business. | Yes | No |

Answering "yes" to four or more questions may indicate that you're suffering from compassion fatigue. [This instrument has not been validated, but the results should serve as a quick check of your state of mind.]

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Warning Signs of Compassion Fatigue

Although symptoms vary, the following red flags may indicate that you have compassion fatigue:

(NOTE: Having any one of these does not indicate CF is present – but if there is a pattern or several, it may be worth asking the question....)

- Abusing drugs, alcohol or food to mask the feelings
- Anger
- Apathy, sad, no longer finds activities pleasurable
- Blaming
- Bottled up emotions
- Chronic lateness
- Chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems and recurrent colds
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling, sexual addictions
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Diminished sense of personal accomplishment
- Exhaustion (physical or emotional)
- Frequent headaches
- Gastrointestinal complaints
- High self-expectations
- Hopelessness
- Hypertension
- Inability to maintain balance of empathy and objectivity
- Increased irritability
- In denial about problems
- Isolation from others
- Legal problems, indebtedness
- Less ability to feel joy
- Low self-esteem
- Mentally and physically tired
- Poor self-care (i.e., hygiene, appearance)
- Preoccupied
- Receives unusual amount of complaints from others
- Reoccurrence of nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic event
- Sleep disturbances
- Voices excessive complaints about administrative functions
- Workholism

Some Suggestions..... Some Do's and don'ts of recovery

Some Do's:

Be kind to yourself.
Start exercising and eating properly.
Get enough sleep.
Take some time off.
Develop interests outside of your field of work.
Identify what's important to you and make sure you are living by it.
Enhance your awareness with education.
Accept where you are on your path at all times and understand that the pain you feel is normal.
Find someone to talk to - but understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.
Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you.
Clarify your personal boundaries. What works for you; what doesn't.
Express your needs verbally.
Take positive action to change your environment.

Point to note:

When we get into a place of compassion fatigue, we tend to eliminate the very things we need to recover!

Some Don'ts:

Compassion fatigue can impair your functioning in ways that you need to keep in mind, so it comes with its own list of "don'ts":

Don't blame others. Similarly, blaming administration, staff, colleagues or the "system" will do you no good. In the extreme, some have wanted to initiate legal action against their workplace. This is not the right time nor the right answer for compassion fatigue. Being adversarial will only exhaust you further and prevent the deeper healing that needs to take place. If, after recovering, you still believe some action is appropriate, you'll be in a much better place to look at your options. For now, hold off. The same goes for looking for another job. Wait until you can see things more clearly and have gotten the stress in your life under control.

Don't:

Look for a new job, buy a new car, get a divorce or have an affair.
Fall into the habit of complaining with your colleagues.
Hire a lawyer.
Work harder and longer.
Self-medicate.
Neglect your own needs and interests.

Don't make big decisions. It is wise for compassion-fatigued clients not to make any major life decisions until they've recovered physically, emotionally and spiritually. This is very important. Don't quit your job, get a divorce, have an affair or spend your money on a lavish trip or a new sports car. It may feel great at the time, but a few days or weeks later you'll find yourself waking up to the same set of problems.

Organisational Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- High absenteeism
- Constant changes in co-workers relationships
- Inability for teams to work well together
- Desire among staff members to break company rules
- Outbreaks of aggressive behaviors among staff
- Inability of staff to complete assignments and tasks
- Inability of staff to respect and meet deadlines
- Lack of flexibility among staff members
- Negativism towards management
- Strong reluctance toward change
- Inability of staff to believe improvement is possible
- Lack of a vision for the future

“ In the
Midst of
movement
and chaos,
keep
stillness
inside of
you. ”
- Deepak Chopra

“ He who
knows
others is
learned. He
who knows
himself is
wise. ”
- Lao-Tzu

“ We shall
draw from
the heart of
suffering
itself the
means of
inspiration
and
survival. ”
- Sir Winston Churchill

“ What lies
behind us
and what
lies before
us are small
matters
compared
to what lies
within us. ”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson