Compassion Fatigue

How to Become a Resilient Professional

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What is Compassion Fatigue?
Compassion Fatigue is a state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events.

Compassion Fatigue is physical, emotional and spiritual fatigue.
“The combined effects of the caregiver’s continuous visualizing of clients’ traumatic images added to the effects of burnout can create a condition progressively debilitating to the caretaker that is called compassion stress or fatigue”.

C.R. Figley
According to Karl LaRowe, M.D.,

“Compassion Fatigue is nothing less than secondary post traumatic stress disorder. It’s the process of absorbing the emotions of people who have suffered or are suffering from illness, adversity, violence or other tragedies. Left untreated and unmanaged, it can lead to debilitating states, such as dizziness, depression, fatigue, anxiety and insomnia”.
Who is Most Affected by Compassion Fatigue?
Those most affected by Compassion Fatigue

- Physicians
- Nurses
- EMTs
- Law Enforcement Officers
- Firemen
- Soldiers
- Clergy
- Mental Health Professionals
- Counselors/Therapists
- Advocate Volunteers
- Human Service Workers
What are the Primary Causes of Compassion Fatigue?
Primary causes of Compassion Fatigue

- The cost of caring about and for traumatized people
- Talking, working or living with people who have been victims
- Feeling isolated and unsupported
- Working beyond your skill level
- Emotional drain of remaining empathetic all the time
About the Limbic Response...

What are the Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue?
Intrusive Symptoms

- Thoughts and images associated with client’s traumatic experiences
- Obsessive/compulsive desire to help clients
- Client/work issues encroaching upon personal time
- Inability to “let go” of work-related matters
- Perception of survivors as fragile and needing assistance of a caretaker (savior)
- Thoughts and feelings of inadequacy
- Sense of entitlement or special-ness
- Perception of world in terms of victims and perpetrators
- Personal activities interrupted by work related issues
Avoidance Symptoms

- Silencing Response (avoiding hearing/witnessing client’s traumatic material)
- Loss of enjoyment in activities/cessation of self care
- Loss of energy
- Loss of hope/sense of dread working with certain clients
- Loss of sense of competence/potency
- Isolation
- Secretive self-medication/addiction (alcohol, drugs, work, sex, food, spending)
- Relational dysfunction
Arousal Symptoms

- Increased anxiety
- Impulsivity/reactivity
- Increased perception of demand/threat (in both job and environment)
- Increased frustration/anger
- Sleep disturbance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Change in weight / appetite
- Somatic symptoms
Consequences of Compassion Fatigue

- Job performance goes down
- Mistakes go up
- Morale drops and relationships are affected
- Home lives deteriorate
- Personality changes or “fades”
- Leads to general decline in overall health
How the stress response affects the body:

- Headache
- Flushed face
- Tense muscles
- Sweaty palms
- Stomach upset & diarrhea
- Frequent illnesses: colds & flus
- Poor memory
- Crying & mood swings
- Racing heart & higher blood pressure
- Shortness of breath
Compassion Fatigue is a process

It develops over time

Presents as a low level of clouding—effecting our ability to care and be concerned for others

“Emotional blunting”
Difference Between Compassion Fatigue and Stress

- Stress is arousal of mind and body in response to demands made upon the individual by an anxiety provoking event.

- We need a certain amount of stress in our lives.

- Positive stress is arousal that contributes to health, satisfaction and productivity.

- Stress keeps us focused, motivated, energized, aware of options, etc.

- Zone of Positive Stress - the tolerance range of stress within which a person is healthy.
Difference Between Compassion Fatigue and Stress

Conversely, Compassion Fatigue is when the individual has gone beyond their positive zone of stress and begin to feel as if they have lost their sense of self to the clients they serve.
Physiological/Neurobiological Reactions to Stress

- **Fight or Flight**
- **Stress Hormones**: adrenaline / cortisol
- **Neurotransmitters levels drop**
- **Symptoms present**
- **If ignored long enough, symptoms escalate into significant health issue**
The cycle of depletion by our work and intentionally refilling ourselves in our lives outside of work, often on a daily basis, may have been what Frankl meant when he challenged us to “endure burning”
Balancing Service and Self Care: Healing Ideas for A Whole Life
General Guidelines

- Become more aware (mindful) of the nature of stressors in your daily life
- Take personal responsibility for your pace of life and for major life changes
- Know your comfort zone (positive zone of stress)
- Find a good fit between your own needs and the demands of your environment

**Let go of what can’t be controlled**

- Know how rapidly and how much your comfort zone can change
- Anticipate the probable stressful effects of major life changes—plan solutions
General Guidelines (con’t)

- Avoid clustering too many major life changes
- Manage daily life effectively
- Establish clear priorities and values so you can select opportunities and challenges wisely
- Focus on being centered and mindful
- Select activities and challenges that are meaningful to you and avoid ones that are not
- Be assertive. Learn to say “no”
- Know your accomplishments
- Recognize what you are grateful for
Life Style Buffers-Good Coping Tools

- Regular aerobic exercise
- Daily deep relaxation
- Good Nutrition
- Sleep Hygiene
- Social Supports
- Personal Anchors
- Spirituality
Self Supervision

According to Gentry & Baranowsky’s...

“We have found that once a caregiver contract the negative symptoms of compassion fatigue, these symptoms will not fully resolve until distorted beliefs about self and the world are in the process of correction. Caregivers recovering from these symptoms will need to soften their critical and coercive self-talk, and shift their motivational styles toward more self-accepting and affirming language and tone if they wish to resolve their compassion fatigue symptoms.”
Transforming Negative Self Talk into Positive Self Talk

- Negative thoughts will produce significant stress
- Positive thoughts encourage well being, confidence and a higher quality of life
- Management of self talk is critical
- This skill can take years to integrate into the person’s coping arsenal
Self Talk Management

- **Catch** *(recognize)* negative self talk

- **Challenge** negative self talk *(Is this a true statement about myself?)*

- **Change** negative self talk *(Substitute a positive statement or affirmation)*
Positive Life Changing Beliefs

- Believe you can win vs. self limiting beliefs
- You are responsible for your life and yourself
- You have the ability and capacity to objectively evaluate all situations
- Challenge can become an opportunity
- Attitude is everything
- Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% your attitude/perception
“We Must Be the Change We Wish To See in the World”
Final Suggestions

- Examine your motivation to help
- Remember to love yourself as much as the clients you serve
- Honor yourself as one of the heroes who does some of the hardest and most important work in the world
- Identify and work on healing your own painful issues. Seek your own therapy
- Learn to protect yourself from others’ emotional pain
- Accept your limitations—you can’t save them all
Final Suggestions (con’t)

- Maintain a healthy and strong support system
- Schedule time to simply relax & play
- Learn that strong emotions can be tolerated and need not be avoided
- Learn and practice effective interpersonal skills
- Treat yourself to sensory rejuvenation
THE Life Balance Pyramid

CREATE BALANCE IN YOUR LIFE
When all areas of the pyramid are working in harmony, you’ll have the greatest sense of well-being and satisfaction in your life. Practice selections in each level that best fit your needs, lifestyle, and values.
Consider the urgency and source of your stress to decide what you need to do for better balance. Add your own ideas to those in the pyramid for more variety.

IMMEDIATE COPING SKILLS
For day-to-day stress such as traffic jams, work overload, or family disagreements, choose one or more of the skills at the top of the pyramid to help manage the situation.

IMMEDIATE COPING
- Relax with deep breathing
- Use positive self-talk
- Envision a pleasant place

DAILY SUPPORTIVE ACTIVITIES
- Pleasurable Joys
  - Enjoy a warm bath
  - Give and get hugs
  - Watch a movie
  - Laugh often
  - Listen to music
- Physical Nourishment
  - Be physically active
  - Get plenty of rest
  - Eat a variety of foods

LIFELONG FOUNDATIONS
- Emotional Well-Being
  - Think optimistically
  - Nurture a positive self-image
  - Express feelings in honest, fair, and direct ways
  - Write in a journal
- Social Connection
  - Do kind deeds for others
  - Volunteer time to a worthy cause
  - Spend time with family, friends, and pets
  - Care for children, elderly, and pets

LIFELONG FOUNDATIONS
- Develop a sense of fulfillment from hobbies or work
- Make time for meditation or prayer
- Connect with nature
- View life’s challenges as opportunities
- Connect with a higher power
- Reflect on your personal values, goals, and choices

For long-term balance that gives you the ability to handle whatever life brings your way and that gives you a sense of peace, practice skills at the base of the pyramid.

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