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What can bring loving relationships to a bitter end, pit caring parents against caring teachers, and emotionally deplete even the most resilient among us? The answer is compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is tantamount to exhaustion—emotional, physical, or both. It's the price we sometimes pay for caring so much and working so hard to improve the lives of others who face various challenges. While the phenomenon has been studied most among those caring for someone suffering from the effects of traumatic stress exposure, many now believe it casts a much wider net.

We find it in parents raising an extremely hard to manage child, and in families caring for a loved one with a serious physical or psychiatric illness. We also find it in spouses, partners, and extended family members, in teachers, therapists, and other health care providers, and in police officers, firefighters, and emergency room hospital workers. In fact, we find it in any relationship where there exists a feeling of compassion for the suffering of another person, ongoing exposure to their suffering, and a sense of responsibility for helping.

When are we at risk? When caring for others obscures our need to also care for

ourselves. Are all caregivers at risk? No. Only those with the ability to empathize with and feel compassion for those whose suffering they are trying to alleviate. If you lack empathy and compassion, you don't have to worry about compassion fatigue. On the other hand, school administrators and others not directly in the line of fire can experience compassion fatigue if the necessary ingredients are present.

While signs and symptoms are known to vary from person to person, the more common ones are similar to those we experience when our emotional fuel tanks are on empty. Examples include:

- feeling a sense of futility or a sense of hopelessness that better days lie ahead
- questioning our abilities or even our worth
- losing patience and the ability to control our emotions
- having difficulty sleeping, feeling tired and not quite ourselves
- losing our spark and sense of humor.

A healthcare worker, likely a nurse, is shown in profile, looking down with a weary expression. She is wearing teal scrubs and has a stethoscope around her neck. Her right hand is pressed against a white wall, and her left hand holds a pink clipboard. The background is a blurred hospital hallway.

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Compassion Fatigue

by Mark Katz, PhD



Resources for Compassion Fatigue

Gift From Within—PTSD Resources for Survivors and Caregivers | GiftFromWithin.org | Charles R. Figley, PhD, gives an overview and provides a lengthy list of references in “Compassion Fatigue: An Introduction”

“Understanding and Preventing Compassion Fatigue” | article and PowerPoint presentation by Angelea Panos, PhD | giftfromwithin.org/html/prvntcf.html

Professional Quality of Life | ProQOL.org | For teachers and professionals

Kristen Race, PhD, **Settle Down, Pay Attention, Say Thank You: A How-To** | [youtube.com/watch?v=Awd0kgxcZws](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Awd0kgxcZws) | TEDxMileHighWomen

Greater Good Science Center | greatergood.berkeley.edu/about | Located at the University of California, Berkeley, GGSC highlights new research on social and emotional well-being, and helps individuals apply this research to their personal and professional lives

Gratitude = Happiness | The Science of Happiness | soulpancake.com | Video created by SoulPancake, the “world’s most recognized positive and inspiring media and entertainment company”

The Movement of Imperfection | shutupabout.com | Website, Facebook group, book *Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid!*

Where to start? Begin listing activities that restore a sense of calm and balance.

Ask others you trust for their ideas.

As new ideas come to mind add them to the list.

Be sure to include regular exercise.

For those whose jobs or family members expose them to ongoing traumatic content, experts find that symptoms can actually resemble those associated with prolonged traumatic stress exposure. Some experts use the term compassion fatigue interchangeably with such terms as “secondary traumatic stress” and “vicarious traumatization.” Charles Figley, PhD, of Tulane University has written extensively about compassion fatigue and differentiates the phenomenon from other terms used in the professional literature.

The good news is that compassion fatigue is preventable—or for those in its throes—reversible. Some experts in the field say it’s simply remembering our ABCs (A = Awareness; B = Balance; C = Connections.) Learn more about the ABCs of Prevention from the article and PowerPoint by Angelea Panos, PhD, a therapist who specializes in trauma and grief. They are posted on the Gift From Within website.

Awareness

Overcoming compassion fatigue begins with an awareness of its signs and symptoms. Many caregivers have never heard the term. This includes those struggling mightily to help a loved one with ADHD. Once aware of the phenomenon, caregivers can now spot early warning signs and take action to restore balance and connections.

If you are a teacher and love your work, but find that work has depleted your compassion fuel tank, it’s not burn-out that you’re experiencing, but rather compassion fatigue. Teachers and other professionals interested in learning more about the difference can visit www.ProQOL.org and complete the Professional Quality of Life Scale.

Balance

Self-care plans are critical. They should include activities that bring joy, hope, laughter, and gratitude. No doubt, this is easier said than done. Our brains are more sensitive to negative information than positive. But there’s good news.

Experts tell us that intentionally paying attention to the positive things in our life strengthens neural pathways to positive memories. This, in turn, can eventually make it easier for us to focus on positive as opposed to negative experiences. Watch the TED talk by brain scientist Kristen Race, an expert on how stress affects the brain

(see the list of resources on previous page). She describes three simple practices for combating stress and significantly improving daily life.

Where to start? Begin listing activities that restore a sense of calm and balance. Ask others you trust for their ideas. As new ideas come to mind add them to the list. Be sure to include regular exercise.

Keep a gratitude journal. At the end of each day write down three things you feel grateful for. Studies show that practicing gratitude can significantly improve our emotional lives.

Join the Movement of Imperfection. The brainchild of Gina Terrasi Gallagher and Patty Terrasi Konjoian, also known as the “Shut Up” Sisters, it’s a movement dedicated to helping “imperfect parents” of “imperfect children” learn to see their children’s differences in a new light. The movement has brought laughter, joy, and hope to countless lives. Anyone can join. And anyone suffering the effects of compassion fatigue can benefit—teachers, therapists, as well as others. Visit their website, shutupabout.com, to learn more.

Connections

Our greatest source of strength is each other. It’s important to restore or actively seek connections with others we value and trust, to whom we can turn for support. Remember that emotions can be contagious. Connecting with others who see the light at the end of the tunnel helps us to see the light at the end of the tunnel as well.

Organizations that increase our understanding of the challenges impacting those we care deeply about (a child, a spouse, a partner, a student, a client, a friend), that advocate on behalf of their needs, and that provide its members with ongoing support and encouragement, loom large in our efforts to prevent and reverse compassion fatigue. All the more reason to support CHADD! 🗣️

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