

Compassion Fatigue: The Stress of Caring Too Much

Elizabeth Coffey, M.A.
State Harm Reduction Program Coordinator
Resource Toolkit
October 15, 2018



Compassion Fatigue

“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.”

C. Figley, 1995

Goals of Training

- Understand what compassion fatigue is and your level of risk.
- Understand and prepare for personal reactions you may experience when working with a drug addicted population.
- Understand the difference between compassion fatigue and burnout.
- Learn about and identify positive coping strategies.

Compassion Fatigue: What is it?

- Gradual lessening of compassion and increased tension over time.
- Reduced willingness to provide care and social services.
- Emotional residue of exposure of working with people who are suffering.
- Differs from burnout (not trauma-related), but can co-exist.
- Can occur due to exposure on one case or due to the “cumulative” level of suffering.
- Also referred to as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatic stress.

www.stress.org

www.psychologytoday.com

Compassion Fatigue: Are You at Risk?

- Healthcare professionals (medical and psychological)
- Emergency care workers
- Law enforcement
- Advocate volunteers
- Those who form close, caring relationships with patients
- Personnel who skip breaks, take extra shifts, or come in on their days off out of a sense of duty
- Those who forego self-care

Activity – Where Do The Stories Go?

1. Where do the stories go?
2. Did your training provide education on self-care, compassion fatigue, or burnout?
3. What are your vulnerabilities?
4. How do you protect yourself while doing this challenging work?
5. Thinking specifically about your current job, what are the biggest challenges?

Compassion Fatigue: Self Assessment

- Answer “Yes” or “No” to the nine statements on the next slide to help assess your risk for compassion fatigue.
- The instrument has not been validated but should serve as a quick check of your state of mind and vulnerability.

Compassion Fatigue: Self Assessment (cont'd)

Personal concerns commonly intrude on my professional 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
My patients' stress 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

Self Assessment Feedback

Answering “Yes” to four or more statements may indicate you are suffering from compassion fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue: Emotional Symptoms

- Apathy
- Rapid mood changes
- Irritability/discontentment
- Hopelessness
- Poor concentration/attention/memory
- Hopelessness/helplessness
- Cynicism
- Resentment
- Numbness
- Aggression/hostility

Compassion Fatigue: Physical Symptoms

- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Headache
- Chronic pain
- Increased substance/food misuse
- Poor self-care
- Gastro-intestinal complaints
- Hypertension

Compassion Fatigue: Work Symptoms

- High absenteeism/chronic lateness
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Reduced willingness to work together as a team
- Lack of flexibility
- Negativism toward management and patients
- Compromised care

Other Manifestations of Compassion Fatigue

- Avoidance
- Guilt about abandoning your job or “mission”
- Persistently on “high alert”
- High expectations
- Spiritual fatigue or exhaustion
- Blaming
- Diminished sense of personal accomplishment

Counter Transference

- Definition: When you start to take on the emotions or the behaviors of those you are trying to help.
- Example: The person you are trying to help is aggravated about something and as a result, you become aggravated.
- The helping relationship becomes a chore.
- Other examples:
 - Extending time with an individual beyond the usual time limit.
 - Unable to step back from a difficult situation.
 - Experiencing hurt feelings over “failures.”
- Counter transference is normal.

Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

Compassion Fatigue	Burnout
The “Cost of Caring”	General Exhaustion
Found in occupations dealing directly with those that are suffering	Found in all occupations
Occurs from exposure to trauma or suffering	Occurs from overworking oneself and occupational stress, NOT trauma
Can suffer from burnout	Can suffer from compassion fatigue

Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

- Monitor your compassion fatigue level on a weekly basis.
 - Use a self-reported 1-10 scale, with 1 representing no symptoms at all.
 - Jot down specific symptoms (i.e. exhaustion, hopelessness).
 - Take action before you reach 9 or 10.
- Make self-care a priority.
 - Is essential to long term care-giving.
 - Protects against compassion fatigue.
- The healthier you are, the better care you can give others.

The Importance of Self-Care

- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Establish a good sleep routine.
- Take time for yourself each day, even if it's just 10 minutes.
 - Take a walk.
 - Meditate/practice deep breathing.
 - Do a 4-minute workout.
 - Take a hot shower or bath.
- Get help with household tasks.

Additional Coping Skills

- Get support from people you love and trust.
- Participate in “debriefing” sessions with colleagues.
- Try not to compare yourself with others.
 - Everyone reacts differently to others’ suffering.
 - There is no right or wrong way to deal with an unexpected event.
- Set healthy boundaries – Say “No” when you can.
- Avoid using alcohol or nonprescription drugs to handle your emotions or relax.
- Know your own limitations – take time for a well-deserved break.
- Seek professional help if you are unable to get back to the “normal” you in 2-3 weeks.

Three-Pronged Strategy

- Professional
 - Training
 - Debriefing
- Organizational
 - Peer supervision/support
 - Acknowledge compassion fatigue
- Personal
 - Transition Time
 - Hobbies
 - Self-care

A Nurse's Journaling Exercise

- Complete the following exercise, titled “A Special Patient” in a notebook, journal, or computer file the next time you feel overwhelmed.
- Recall a time when you experienced a flood of emotions after interacting with a patient and then answer the following:
 - What emotions did you feel?
 - What lesson(s) did you learn?
 - What would you do differently, if anything?
 - How can you apply this to future situations?
- After completing this exercise, write a reflection about the journaling experience or read it to a trusted friend or colleague.

The Next Step is Yours to Take

- Assess your risk level.
- Improve and maintain work/life balance.
- Develop resiliency.
- Make a commitment to implement changes.

Final Thoughts

“Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

Parker Palmer, [Let Your Life Speak: Listening For The Voice of Vocation](#)

Contact

Elizabeth J. Coffey
State Harm Reduction Program Coordinator
West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources
Bureau for Public Health
Office of Epidemiology and Prevention Services
Division of STD and HIV
350 Capitol Street, Room 125
Phone: (304) 356-4677
Fax: (304) 558-4744
Email: Elizabeth.J.Coffey@wv.gov