



Self-Care | *Tip sheet*

# Compassion Fatigue

If you are in the care giving field—either providing direct or indirect patient care—there's a good chance that you have or will experience compassion fatigue at some point in your career. Compassion fatigue is sometimes referred to as professional burnout or secondary traumatic stress disorder. It is considered to be the cost of caring – the emotional, physical and spiritual cost of caring for those who are suffering and typically develops after prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. Those who have experienced this type of “normal” stress response often describe it as deep emotional, physical and spiritual exhaustion accompanied by a sense of “emotional pain.”

Compassion fatigue builds over time and can manifest itself in a variety of ways. If you are the primary caretaker of an elderly parent or relative, you might also be at risk for developing compassion fatigue. It is common that those who work or live with you will probably recognize some of your symptoms before you do.

If the number of people suffering from compassion fatigue within any organization reaches a critical mass, it can have a negative effect on productivity and the overall quality of patient care.

## Signs of Compassion Fatigue

### Individual Signs

- Severe mood changes
- Decreased compassion, numbness
- Chronic physical ailments
- Mental and physical exhaustion
- Abuse of alcohol, drugs or food
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Excessive complaints about administration
- Increase in interpersonal conflicts
- Low motivation, low morale

### Organizational Signs

- High rate of absenteeism
- High employee turnover rate
- Increase in Worker's Comp costs
- Negative attitude toward management
- Outbreaks of aggression among staff
- Staff consistently missing deadlines
- Poor teamwork in many departments
- An increase in error rates or mistakes
- Difficulty integrating new colleagues

## Healing yourself as a caretaker

It is possible to recover from compassion fatigue without quitting your job or leaving your profession. The first step is to commit to self-care. Consider yourself and your health a major priority. **You** are your most important patient. Taking a couple new actions will help you to feel better fairly soon.

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## Compassion Fatigue

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**Take care of your physical self** – get enough sleep and eat more healthy foods when possible.

**Make time to exercise** – even walking 20 minutes a day at lunch time will help.

**Take a break** – get out of the office and clear your head. It will change the energy around you and help to reenergize your mind.

**Learn to say “No”** – people in the caring fields tend to overextend themselves. Learning to say no to requests that are not absolutely necessary will free up time to focus on you.

**Take care of your spiritual self** – attend a religious service, take a meditation class, walk in the woods or along the beach.

**Feed your soul** – do something that recharges your batteries and brings you joy at least once per week, more often if you can.

**Spend time with people who are optimistic**, and help you to feel good about yourself, and about life. Spending time with complainers or negative people will only bring you down.

**Talk to supportive people about how you are feeling** – join a peer support group, talk to a trusted friend.

It's very important for you to find a balance of work and play that supports your values and overall mental and physical health. It is possible to recover from compassion fatigue, you just have to make sure that you take care of yourself at the same level as you take care of others.

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