

## Compassion Fatigue

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Walking out of the early morning meeting with your client, you feel your mood fall flat. Despite the beautiful summer weather, you just can't shake the negative feelings stemming from the appointment. She has just been through so much, and even with all that she is doing right, you can't help but feel a deep sense of frustration and concern for her future.

You check your schedule, three appointments to go before lunch. Are any of them going to turn out well? You're hopeful, but there is a looming sense of doubt.



### **What is Compassion Fatigue?**

Compassion fatigue is the emotional toll that can occur when a healthcare or social service provider frequently interacts with clients who have undergone stressful and traumatic situations. While a single experience of this secondary stress may be a normal part of life, experiencing this on a daily basis (as many healthcare providers do) can be detrimental to your emotional wellbeing. Emotional numbness, constant feelings of stress and anxiety, exhaustion, sleeplessness and nightmares, as well as being emotionally unavailable to yourself and those close to you, are all symptoms associated with compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is closely related to burnout. Burnout is the state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that emerges gradually when work demands and the resources available are out of balance. If compassion fatigue is not addressed and treated, it typically results in burnout. When you are emotionally exhausted, your physical and mental health soon follow.

### **Preventing Compassion Fatigue**

While secondary stress will always be a part of the healthcare and social services fields, compassion fatigue does not have to be. There are specific steps you can take in order to prevent this condition from affecting you. With regards to prevention, a multidimensional approach has been found to work best. These are a few steps you can take to help protect your emotional wellbeing.

- *Make your self-care a priority.* If you don't take proper care of yourself, you will not be able to care for others. Eat well, get some exercise, and most importantly, get plenty of sleep.
- *Have a clear line between your work and home lives.* This can be difficult with such an emotionally invested career, but take intentional steps to create a separation. When you are at home, avoid checking work messages or emails. In addition, many people find that having specific routine when they get home helps them make the mental transition out of the work mindset.

- *Build in a practice of self-awareness.* This can be a journaling routine, meditation, or even simply asking yourself the questions “How am I feeling right now? Why might I be feeling this way?”
- *Build in a system of accountability.* Talk to your supervisor or a colleague about this, and have them check in with you about your emotional wellbeing. If it’s a colleague, you can check in with them as well.
- *Know your limits.* Remind yourself that you are only one person. You only have control over your own actions, and there are many things that will be out of your reach. Let them go.

### **Treating Compassion Fatigue**

The secondary stressors associated with compassion fatigue can be treated much like any other stressors in your life. It is important to know how you prefer to manage your stress, both from a long term maintenance standpoint (your daily or weekly practices that relieve stress) as well as a short term (emergency) standpoint. Know what kinds of [practices](#) relieve stress for you, and when you utilize them, remind yourself of why you are engaging in these activities. Sometimes a simple mental note “I’m doing this to relieve stress” can help increase the impact you receive from a stress management practice.

If you find that compassion fatigue is impacting your mental and emotional wellbeing, it can also be beneficial to seek support from a supervisor or medical professional. They may be able to help process your secondary stress, especially after a crisis situation. It might also be helpful to look at adjusting your caseload, or adjusting your job assignments if possible. Many organizations also have access to Employee Assistance Programs or outside agencies who can help you treat conditions like compassion fatigue.