



Understanding Compassion Fatigue

Recognizing and Addressing Work-Related Trauma

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of helping others, often experienced by people in professions that deal with vulnerable populations and stressful situations daily. It's a state where giving and caring for others becomes frustrating, stressful, and anxiety-provoking, making it difficult to access the empathy and compassion that initially motivated a person to help.

Compassion fatigue includes:

- **Burnout:** A feeling of total exhaustion and depletion.
- **Secondary Traumatic Stress:** Physical and emotional symptoms that arise from exposure to the trauma of others.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** A change in one's basic assumptions about life and the world due to prolonged exposure to the trauma of others.
- **Moral Injury/Trauma:** The stress and outrage caused by witnessing injustices, whether organizational, interpersonal, or related to the situations clients face.

The Role of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the crucial first step in understanding and addressing compassion fatigue. It requires deep personal honesty and involves asking yourself difficult questions, such as:

- What are my motivations for working in this field?
- What are my values regarding the helping process?
- What are my attitudes about the people I'm helping?

Ignoring who we are puts both ourselves and our clients at risk. We must examine our own motivations, biases, and emotional responses before we can effectively help others.

The Myth of Invulnerability and Empathy

Human service workers are at risk of compassion fatigue precisely because of their capacity for empathy and their desire to help. Empathy has multiple meanings and effects on the body:

- **Cognitive Empathy:** The ability to imagine what others are experiencing, or to "put ourselves in their shoes".
- **Psychological Empathy:** The brain's mirror neurons allow us to share in the emotional experiences of others.
- **Physiological Empathy:** Our bodies can be triggered into the same state of physiological arousal as others who are in distress. This is an involuntary response over which we have little control.

Types of Work-Related Stress

There are four main types of work-related stress that contribute to compassion fatigue:

1. **Burnout:** A feeling of total exhaustion that can affect anyone in any job. It's often the foundation for more severe forms of work-related stress. The number one reason for burnout is a feeling of ineffectiveness.
2. **Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS):** Physical and emotional symptoms that develop after being exposed to the trauma of others. The symptoms of STS can be nearly identical to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
3. **Vicarious Traumatization:** Occurs from prolonged exposure to the trauma of others, which fundamentally changes our worldview. We may begin to see life through the lens of our work, losing our basic sense of security and seeing danger where others do not.
4. **Moral Injury/Trauma:** This is the stress caused by the injustices we witness in the human services field. It can lead to feelings of guilt if we become angry at clients or lose our sense of compassion.

A Mind/Body Approach to Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue affects both the mind and the body.

- **Mind:** Trauma can create a danger-oriented worldview, where the mind sees life through the lens of victimization and operates in a defensive mode.
- **Body:** Trauma makes the body highly reactive, leading to an elevated baseline of arousal and an extreme vulnerability to triggers and everyday stressors.

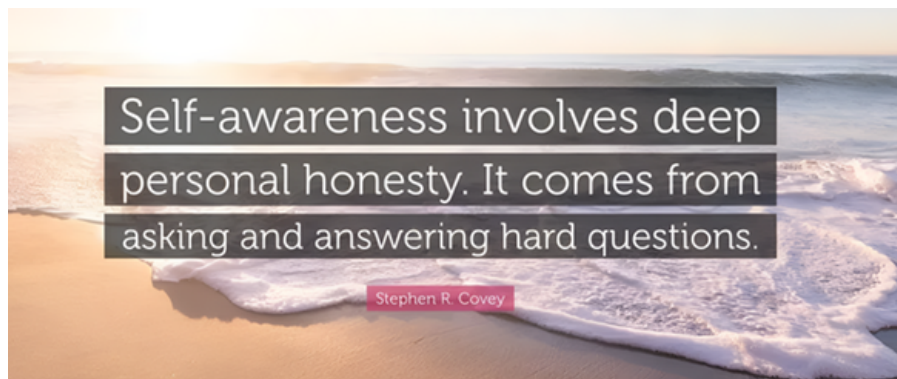
The effects of trauma are psychological, emotional, and physical. Symptoms can include anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, fatigue, chronic pain, and sleep disturbances.

Self-Care: Our Ethical Responsibility

Self-care is an ethical responsibility for human service workers. It is essential for managing compassion fatigue and the constant stress of the job. One effective technique for calming the mind and body is the 4-7-8 breathing technique.

4-7-8 Breathing Technique:

1. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a "whooshing" sound.
 2. Inhale quietly through your nose for a count of 4.
 3. Hold your breath for a count of 7.
 4. Exhale completely through your mouth for a count of 8.
- **Tip:** An effective way to stimulate your vagus nerve is to slowly say "VOOOOOO" while exhaling and feeling the vibration in your mouth, neck, and throat.



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