

Symptoms and prevention outlined

by Kathy O'Grady

As mental health caregivers, we are constantly exposed to stories of trauma and violence. With the recent and future return of soldiers from the Global War on Terrorism, it is more important than ever to recognize and treat symptoms of compassion fatigue.

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DEFINITION

Compassion fatigue is a recent term coined to describe the emotional result of working with the suffering, especially with those who have been exposed to traumatic events. As professionals who work with combat veterans, we must contend with not only the normal stressors that life and work bring, but we also must address feelings we experience for the person who is suffering as a result of trauma.

Compassion fatigue is not the same as burnout. Burnout is a cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with the stress and everyday hassles of work, and is usually treated (counseling, reprioritizing life, vacation, time off, transfer) so that burnout can be alleviated. However, if symptoms of burnout go untreated, problems could progress and develop into compassion fatigue.

The term, compassion fatigue, refers to a physical and spiritual fatigue or exhaustion that takes over a person. Compassion fatigue is a one-way street in which individuals are giving out a great deal of compassion to others over a period of time and are not able to give enough back to reassure themselves that the world is a hopeful place. The problem is a process that takes months or years to surface.

Compassion fatigue is also a state of tension and preoccupation with a client or traumatic event that also can be thought of as secondary posttraumatic stress disorder. Compassion fatigue is a more widely used term for secondary traumatic stress disorder, which is nearly identical to PTSD except it affects those emotionally affected by the trauma of another person (usually a client or family member). The resulting physical, emotional and spiritual damage can leave a caregiver depleted which may result in deep emotional pain.

RECOGNIZING SYMPTOMS

It is important to recognize symptoms of compassion fatigue in ourselves as well as coworkers. Warning signs can include lingering anger, chronic lateness, a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, exhaustion (physical and emotional), frequent headaches, gastrointestinal problems, an inability to maintain a balance of empathy and objectivity, increased irritability, low self-esteem, sleep disturbance, workaholism, emotional withdrawal, isolation from coworkers, and decreased ability to feel joy. The caregiver forgets why they wanted to help people in the first place.

Secondary posttraumatic stress can trigger a caregiver's memories of firsthand traumatic experiences, resulting in symptoms that can be debilitating. Often one of the first signs is the occurrence of emotional blunting.

In a therapeutic relationship between veteran and counselor, it is important to have the ability to empathize so that we can understand and help clients. If empathy is missing, it is unlikely that therapeutic change will occur. Yet, one of the consequences of being traumatized as a result of caring about people who have been exposed to stressors is that it sneaks up on you. Compassion fatigue can result in poor job performance and even drive some people who experience symptoms to change vocation.

Acknowledging the problem and getting the needed support can help alleviate symptoms of compassion fatigue. Encouraging staff meetings to discuss feelings and emotions allows an individual to verbalize emotions and help keep compassion fatigue from taking over. This process also can help individuals maintain a healthy perspective because when people can show their feelings at work they ultimately do a better job and have more energy.

OVERCOMING COMPASSION FATIGUE

You are done. You are tapped out and exhausted—no energy left to give others—we have all been there. Before the emotional problems associated with compassion fatigue take over and result in apathy there are certain steps that need to be taken. Some of the strategies used to help cope with symptoms are:

1. *Spiritual*

Solitude, stillness and silence are major sources of spiritual replenishment

2. *Physical*

Exercise helps boost the flow of endorphins to brain and body

3. *Mental*

Give your mind a break—focus on positive events outside of the workplace

4. *Emotional*

Learn to set healthy boundaries to avoid relational and emotional overload

To be caregivers, we must choose to walk into pain and, in order to maintain our health, walk away from the pain. We must learn to cope effectively with our feelings and emotions in order to lead positive personal and professional lives. The fine line is trying to remain sensitive while not allowing ourselves to get overwhelmed. We have to look out for our own needs and encourage our coworkers to do the same.

PREVENTION

Counselors have to continually practice good emotional health maintenance along the way and maintain balance in their lives. A counselor has to identify a portion of life where they are able to take, rather than give. Improve the quality of your life if you want to better manage the stressors in your life. To prevent compassion fatigue you need to have a personal plan of action.

Take care of yourself.

Caregivers are good at taking care of everybody but themselves. Doing something good for oneself is a difficult concept for caregivers to accept because there is an intrinsic bias that somehow one is failing as a caregiver if one takes time out to do good to themselves. The caregiving profession does not require you to sacrifice your life and your whole family's life for work.

So, what should you do?

For starters, practice what you preach—eat right, get sufficient rest, and exercise routinely. Pay more attention to your body's signals of stress. Learn to pinpoint the sources of stress and practice stress-reducing strategies like progressive relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and meditation.

We live in a world where we are constantly bombarded with bad news by the news media, details are sometimes difficult to avoid. Outside information can bring us to a point where we may shut down because we become too emotionally taxed to feel for others. Attempt to take a break from news media exposure—

turn off the television, read magazines related to hobbies rather than news publications. The temporary escape may help to restore yourself.

Make life balance a priority.

One of the best ways to arm yourself against compassion fatigue is to have a rich, fulfilling life outside of the Vet Center. You have to look for real life satisfaction away from work. Just as a good financial advisor doesn't recommend that you put all of your assets into one stock, you shouldn't put all of your emotional assets into work. Of course knowing there's life outside the Vet Center and making the changes necessary to tap into that life are two very different things.

Sometimes you can't prevent compassion fatigue but practicing these techniques can restore your ability to feel compassion for and sensitivity toward the emotions of others. Readers may wish to complete the 30-item checklist (see reference) published by Beth Hudnall Stamm, Ph.D., as one option for self-assessment and better personal understanding. ■

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REFERENCE

Beth Hudnall Stamm, Ph.D., *Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Fatigue and Satisfaction Subscales, R-III (Pro-QOL)*, 2003.0

Internet address:

<http://www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/tests/ProQOL.htm>

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Social Worker, M.S.W., and Psychologist, Ph.D.
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Counselors receive ongoing, inservice training from experts in the field of posttrauma disorders.

To inquire about joining the Vet Center team, contact a VA Readjustment Counseling Service regional office nearest the location where you wish to work. Telephone numbers and addresses are listed at right. Call or write today.

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