

Leadership Bites: Compassion Fatigue

LEADERSHIP LEARNING IN 20 MINUTES

NHS

Leadership Academy

South East

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue (CF) refers to the profound emotional and physical exhaustion that caregivers and helping professionals can develop over the course of their time as helpers. Their empathy, hope, and compassion - all of the things that keep them connected to others and feeling positive about themselves in their caregiver role - is gradually eroded. People suffering from CF report feelings of:

- short-temperedness, constant guilt, or resentment at the never-ending demands on their time
- isolation from a support network
- helplessness or increased cynicism or dispiritedness

Many find ...

- it difficult to regenerate and renew themselves after caring for someone,
- it increasingly challenging for them to access a caring mindset
- it increasingly difficult to maintain a respectful stance towards their clients,
- they make more errors at work or become short-tempered at home.

Example: A support worker has spent years working with families in crisis. She has seen them at their most difficult moments, seen parents get better and then relapse, seen kids struggle, succeed, and fail due to neglect, a lack of resources, or an inability to escape from the toxic relationships surrounding them. She has spent hours on the phone with people begging for help, in floods of tears, or blaming her for outcomes she has no control over and can see that there are thousands more families just like them. Eventually she has no energy left to give – either at work or at home. She finds herself taking shortcuts at work, avoiding phone calls. She comments that her clients have “no hope” of ever changing. She has also quit her personal hobbies as she’s too tired and they no longer feel as enjoyable as they once did.

Compassion Fatigue is an occupational hazard. It is likely that anyone, in a long-term caring role, will develop a certain amount of it. We develop it because we care and are exhausted, or because we used to care and are emotionally or psychologically flattened.

Who does Compassion Fatigue affect?

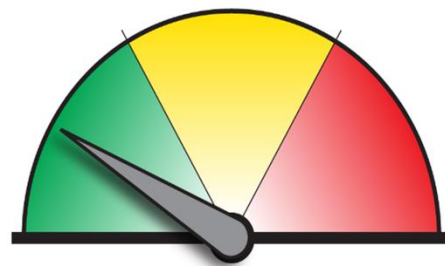
Anyone in a caring role. You may be a front-line worker such as a police or fire officer, a nurse or doctor, a social worker or teacher. You may be a carer for a family member, or a friend with ongoing anxiety or who is coping with addiction. You could even be a counsellor or work in a law firm or council building where you hear stories of people suffering or seeking help and advice on a daily basis. Other people who work with animals, for example in a shelter, or people who care for the environment can also suffer from Compassion Fatigue.

What are the Signs of Compassion Fatigue?

Physical	Behavioural	Emotional
Chronic physical exhaustion, insomnia, headaches, shock, rapid heartbeat, joint / muscle pains, breathing difficulty, aches & pains, dizziness, impaired immune system, difficulty falling / staying asleep, hypochondria, and somatization	Impatient, withdrawn, irritable, moody, anger and irritability, losing things nightmares, appetite change, hypervigilance, isolating, accident prone, excessive use of substances such as alcohol and drugs, absenteeism, avoiding clients, depleted parenting, compromised care for clients	Chronic emotional exhaustion Powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, anger, numbness, fear, helplessness, sadness, depression, depleted, shock, self-contempt, blunted or enhanced affect, depersonalisation or numbness, troubling dreams, intrusive imagery, heightened anxiety or irrational fears, inability to tolerate strong emotions, mood swings, restlessness, diminished sense of enjoyment in life and in career, Resentment and cynicism, negative self-image, emotional distancing,
Cognitive	Spiritual	Relationships
Lowered concentration, apathy, rigidity, minimisation, preoccupation with trauma, perfectionism, spacing out, self-doubt, find it difficult to make decisions, increased sense personal vulnerability / threat	Questioning life's meaning, loss of purpose, pervasive hopelessness, questioning of religious beliefs, loss of faith, scepticism, cynicism, lack of self-satisfaction	Withdrawal, mistrust, overprotective as a spouse / parent, under-responds to crises of loved ones, loneliness, reduced ability to feel concern / empathy / positive feelings for clients, depersonalisation, getting angry with co-workers, workplace gossip / negativity, not having energy to be there for someone, intimacy problems. Dread of working with certain clients. Difficulty separating personal and professional lives. Failure to nurture and develop non work-related aspects of life.

What are My Big Three Warning Signs?

1. What **physical** signs & symptoms stand out most for me?
 2. What **behaviours** show I'm starting to head to yellow?
 3. What are my **key emotional reactions** when I'm heading for trouble?
- What are my particular vulnerabilities?
(For example, maybe you're going through a tough time, or perhaps a client reminds you a little of someone you care for)
 - How can you protect yourself while doing this challenging work?



You might consider chatting your answers to these this through with a friend or a supervisor.

Use the space here to jot down some changes you could make in the next ...

Week:
Month:
Year:

What if I think someone is suffering from CF?

Show you care. Some helpers feel blamed for their compassion fatigue. Maybe they picked up on an implied message at work that “if you feel burnt out, it means you are not taking good enough care of yourself”. This might make them stay even quieter because it ignores a key contributing factor that most helpers have no or little control over (caseloads etc). Be kind, supportive and start small, it can be hard to hear that something you’ve been trying to hide and cope with on your own is obvious to others. Simply talking about the effects of the work can be helpful and a good entry point.

Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.

Brené Brown

Developing compassion fatigue is a gradual, cumulative process and so is healing from its effects. A few people can be fully restored by taking a holiday or going for a massage. Most of us however need to make life changes, be more boundaried, and put our own health and wellness at the top of the priority list.

Suggested Reading List

The Compassion Fatigue Workbook by Francoise Mathieu

The Resilient Practitioner by Thomas M. Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison

Trauma Stewardship by Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk

Further learning ...

For further information and learning, as well as suggested activities, feel free to visit the People.NHS.uk website or our [South East Leadership Academy site](#).



Time to reflect...

Take some time to note down your thoughts on what you've learned.

What resonated?

What has made you curious?

What small changes could you make to start having an impact differently and quickly?

What might you need to share with your team, and commit to 'testing and learning' together?

