

Self-care & Nurturance

Helping others puts you in direct contact with other people's lives. The compassion for those you help has both positive and negative effects on your life. Some people become so involved in their clients' lives that they neglect themselves and begin to suffer emotionally and physically. Obviously this is very unhealthy and not sustainable.

1. Compassion Fatigue 'Secondary Traumatic Stress' or 'Vicarious Trauma'

There are very few people who can be unaffected by someone suffering. 'Compassion fatigue' is the stress resulting from helping a traumatized or suffering person. For care givers, this is an occupational hazard.¹

2. Signs and Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

The common effects of compassion fatigue are cumulative, emotionally intrusive and painful and modifiable. However, there are more specific effects as outlined below.

2.1. Cognitive

▪ Diminished Concentration	▪ Confusion
▪ Loss of meaning, motivation	▪ Decreased self-esteem
▪ Pre-occupation with trauma	▪ Apathy
▪ Rigidity	▪ Disorientation
▪ Whirling thoughts	▪ Thoughts of self-harm or harm towards others
▪ Self-doubt	▪ Perfectionism
▪ No energy	

2.2. Emotional

▪ Feeling powerless	▪ Feeling helpless
▪ Anxiety	▪ Guilt
▪ Anger or rage	▪ Survivor guilt
▪ Shut down	▪ Numbness
▪ Fear	▪ Sadness
▪ Depression	▪ Hyper-sensitive
▪ Emotional liability	▪ Overwhelmed
▪ Depleted	

2.3. Behavioural

▪ Clingy	▪ Impatient
▪ Irritable	▪ Withdrawn
▪ Moody	▪ Regression
▪ Sleep disturbances	▪ Appetite changes
▪ Nightmares	▪ Hyper-arousal
▪ Elevated startle response	▪ Use of negative coping(smoking, alcohol)
▪ Accident proneness	▪ Losing things
▪ Self harm behaviours	

2.4. Spiritual

▪ Questioning the meaning of life	▪ Loss of purpose
▪ Lack of self satisfaction	▪ Anger at God
▪ Questioning of prior religious beliefs	

2.5. Interpersonal

▪ Withdrawal	▪ Decreased interest in intimacy and sex
▪ Mistrust	▪ Isolation
▪ Negative impact on parenting	▪ Concern about aggression
▪ Protection of anger or blame	▪ Intolerance
▪ Loneliness	

2.6. Physical

▪ Shock	▪ Sweating
▪ Rapid heartbeat	▪ Breathing difficulties
▪ Somatic reactions	▪ Aches and pains
▪ Dizziness	▪ Impaired immune system
▪ Fatigue	▪ Tiredness

3. Reasons for Vulnerability to Compassion Fatigue

1. A good counsellor, social worker or trauma worker has an empathetic nature. Whilst this is helpful for the victim, it does unfortunately lead to transference of trauma from the victim to the caregiver.
2. Many trauma workers have experienced some form of event in their lives which is possibly why they chose to work in this field. This leads to them reliving their experience.
3. Any unresolved trauma of the worker resurfaces when they deal with similar cases.
4. Children's trauma is especially provocative for caregivers because children are vulnerable and innocent.
5. The pervasiveness of sexual abuse of a child adds another dimension of trauma.

4. Self Nurturance and Care

No normal person can remain unaffected when dealing with victims of abuse on a daily basis. As such, all caregivers and trauma workers need to look after themselves if they are to keep helping others.

Following are some tips for self-nurturance and care:

- Get supervision from someone who understands the dynamics of victim trauma and its impact.
- Clarify your own sense of purpose and meaning in life.
- Identify your own personal and social resources and support system and then plan strategies for their use.
- Diversify your interests to include balance and introduce variety to your life.
- Play - fun and laughter is good medicine for anyone!
- Be creative.
- Develop your spiritual side as a grounding tool.
- Take care of yourself physically – eat healthily and exercise.
- Develop personal rituals to ensure safety and empowerment.
- Dream.
- Keep a journal. Writing about and acknowledging your feelings may be therapeutic.

- Modify your work schedule to fit your life.
- Get therapy for personal issues and identify triggers.
- Know your limitations and levels of tolerance.
- Have hope in the ability of people to change, heal and grow.
- Admit when you do not know the answer, or when you make a mistake.
- Keep the boundaries you set for yourself and others.
- Try and keep a sense of humour.
- Be kind to yourself. Nurture yourself.
- Listen to your body: Hungry – Angry – Lonely – Tired.
- Have realistic expectations. It is okay to ask for help.
- Relaxation.
- Spend time with nature.
- Music is therapeutic and healing.

¹ Compassion Fatigue: coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized / edited by Charles R. Figley. New York : Brunner/Mazel, c1995.