

Compassion Fatigue for Caregivers

Are you drained, tapped out, have little energy to give others? We have all been there. Usually, after a little break we revive and step back up to the plate. What happens, however, when these feelings do not pass - going beyond fatigue and turning into something much worse, like indifference? This could be a problem for those caring for an elderly parent, a loved one with a brain injury or for health care professionals providing care to others.

What is compassion fatigue?

This term has replaced the more familiar term "burn-out." It refers to a physical, emotional and spiritual fatigue or exhaustion that takes over a person and causes a decline in an individual's ability to experience joy or to feel and care for others. Compassion fatigue is a one-way street, in which individuals are giving out a great deal of energy and compassion to others over a period of time, yet aren't able to get enough back to reassure themselves that the world is a hopeful place. It is this constant outputting of compassion and caring over time that can lead to these feelings.

What causes it?

Compassion fatigue comes from a variety of sources. Although it often affects those working in caregiving professions - nurses, physicians, mental health workers and clergymen - it can affect people in any kind of situation or setting where they're doing a great deal of caregiving and expending emotional and physical energy day in and day out.

Who is most at risk of developing compassion fatigue?

Anyone in a caregiving role is at risk. Take someone who is actively engaged in taking care of a family member, especially during a crisis period when there is a higher need to give out feelings of compassion and sensitivity. If the crisis does not pass quickly and the individual continues functioning at this level, they are just as susceptible to compassion fatigue over time as those in high-risk professions.

What are some signs of compassion fatigue?

First, you should understand that it is a process. It is not a matter of one day, you are living your life with a great deal of energy and enjoyment, and the next, you wake up exhausted and devoid of any energy - both physical and emotional. Compassion fatigue develops over time - taking weeks, sometimes years to surface. It is a low level, chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in your life. Over time, your ability to feel and care for others may lack meaning. You may feel guilty, disconnected or have problems making decisions. You also might react to situations differently than one would normally. The worst symptom of compassion fatigue is denial because it prohibits family caregivers from examining the feelings associated with their caregiving situation.

If you are having these feelings, what can you do?

The most critical need is to acknowledge that you may be experiencing it. All of us have multiple demands and energy drains in our lives - some positive, some negative - which all require a great deal of emotional and physical attention. There are, however, many hands-on things you can do to reduce the feelings of compassion fatigue. For one, start refocusing on yourself. Before you can tend to and be sensitive to the needs of others, you have to take care of your own well-being. This can be as simple as getting plenty of rest, becoming more aware of your dietary and recreational habits and choosing healthy activities during your downtime. Consider documenting your thoughts and feelings related to caregiving in a journal, attend a caregiver support group, or discuss feelings with a counselor. Remember, the healing process takes time, as does the development of the problem.

Is there anyway to prevent compassion fatigue?

It is much easier to stop it from occurring in the first place than it is to repair things once it sets in. You have to continually practice good emotional health maintenance along the way and maintain some sort of balance in your life. There has to be a portion of your life in which you need to take, rather than give. Beyond practicing self-care skills, you need to put yourself in situations in which you see the positives in life, for example, volunteering where you are able to give and receive. Sometimes, you cannot prevent compassion fatigue from occurring. However, practicing some of these techniques can restore your ability to feel compassion for and sensitivity to the troubles and difficulties of others.

What if you are caring for an elderly parent or family member and develop these feelings?

You need to seek assistance from others - siblings, relatives, friends and neighbors - to give yourself a breather. If you are the one responsible for accompanying your love one to medical appointments - you might ask another family member to do that task for a while you pick up another.

We are all bombarded with bad news everyday just by listening to the news. Can this desensitize us as well and what can we do about it?

We live in a world in which the media constantly bombards us with images of poverty and violence, bringing us to a point where we almost shut down because it becomes too emotionally taxing to feel for others. One way to prevent this from happening is to refrain from watching the news or getting on social media. This mild escapism can help prevent your heartstrings from being constantly tugged by all the sad things taking place in the world.

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