

# Life solutions Trauma



## CARING FOR THE CARE GIVER

*“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.”*

*Charles R. Figley, 1995*

# Mother Teresa Understood Compassion Fatigue

She wrote in her plan to her superiors that it was mandatory for her nuns to take an entire year off from their duties every 4-5 years to allow them to heal from the effects of their care-giving work.

Not only are caregivers vulnerable, but members of the team or family are as well. Caregivers should not intentionally expose themselves to trauma, unless required to perform a mission.

Events or situations that cause one to experience an unusually strong reaction and often overpowers one's usual coping mechanisms can contribute to compassion fatigue.

## Key Definitions

### Compassion Fatigue

Also called “vicarious traumatization” or secondary traumatization (Figley, 1995), compassion fatigue is the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. It differs from burnout, but it can co-exist with burnout. Compassion fatigue can occur due to exposure from one case or it can be due to a “cumulative” level of trauma.

### Burnout

Burnout is the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress, not trauma-related.

### Primary Traumatic Stress

Primary stressors are those inherent in the extreme event, such as what was immediately experienced or witnessed, especially those things most contributing to a traumatic response.

## Stages Leading Toward Burnout

- Enthusiasm
- Stagnation
- Frustration
- Apathy

## Commonalities of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

- Emotional exhaustion
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work
- Mental exhaustion
- Decreased interactions with others (isolation)
- Depersonalization (symptoms disconnected from real causes)
- Physical exhaustion

## Clear Differences Between Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

- Compassion fatigue has a more rapid onset while burnout emerges over time
- Compassion fatigue has a faster recovery (less severe, if recognized and managed early)

# Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- Affects many dimensions of your well-being
- Nervous system arousal (Sleep disturbance)
- Emotional intensity increases
- Cognitive ability decreases
- Behavior and judgment impaired
- Isolation and loss of morale
- Depression and PTSD (potentiate)
- Loss of self-worth and emotional modulation
- Identity, worldview, and spirituality impacted
- Beliefs and psychological needs—safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, and control
- Loss of hope and meaning=existential despair
- Anger toward perpetrators or causal events

“First, you should understand that it’s a process. It’s not a matter of one day, you’re 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. Basically, it’s a low level, chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in your life—whether you work in or outside the home. Over time, your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion. You also might experience an emotional blunting—whereby you react to situations differently than one would normally expect.” *When Helping Hurts* by F. Oshberg, M.D.

# Tips For Managing Compassion Fatigue

## Do

- Find someone to talk to
- Understand that the pain you feel is normal
- Exercise and eat properly
- Get enough sleep
- Take some time off
- Develop interests outside of medicine
- Identify what’s important to you.

## Don’t

- Blame others
- Look for a new job, buy a new car, get a divorce or have an affair
- Fall into the habit of complaining with your colleagues
- Hire a lawyer
- Work harder and longer
- Self-medicate
- Neglect your own needs and interests

# Contributing Factors Putting You at Risk of Compassion Fatigue

- Ability to function is interfered with or altered
- Situation or incident does not seem “typical” or “ordinary;” it feels traumatic
- “Compassion stress” impinges upon or breaks through normal boundaries
- Regularly waking up tired in the morning and struggling to get to work?
- Feeling as if you are working harder but accomplishing less?
- Becoming frustrated/irritated easily?
- Losing compassion for some people while becoming over involved in others?
- Routinely feeling bored or disgusted?
- Experiencing illness, aches and pains

## The Path to Wellness

Once you realize that you are a candidate for compassion fatigue, or are already suffering its effects, exploring this new awareness can lead to insights concerning past traumas, pain, and defeating behaviors. A common and understandable coping mechanism in caregiving is to simply stuff the overwhelming emotions that surface repeatedly in your work. How else can you keep going? Eventually, those emotions refuse to be ignored. All too often, psychological and physical crisis occurs.

With support, insightful information, and authentic self-care, you can begin to understand the complexity of the emotions you’ve been juggling and, most likely, suppressing. Most people never take the time to understand how their jobs affect them emotionally. Give yourself credit for moving forward and affecting change. Your hard work will pay off.

## Authentic and Sustainable Self Care Begins With You

- Be kind to yourself
- Enhance your awareness with education
- Accept where you are on your path at all times
- Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you
- Listen to others who are suffering
- Clarify your personal boundaries: what works for you, what doesn’t
- Express your needs verbally
- Take positive action to change your environment

For more information, please contact us at

[LifeTraumaSolutions.com](http://LifeTraumaSolutions.com)

**Ron Ringo, PhD**

Ron@RealityDoc.com | 619.855.5446

**Shirley Ringo**

Shirley@LifeTraumaSolutions.com | 619.855.5445

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