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Ascension WI EAP

Compassion Fatigue--The Cost of Caring

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Compassion Fatigue (CF) is often described as the “cost of caring” for others in emotional and physical pain (Figley, 1982). It is an occupational hazard that impacts everyone who has the capacity for empathy, and especially those in a helping profession. “The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet” (Remen 1996).

Compassion fatigue can set in when you experience secondary trauma from your clients or patients who are suffering. You may still feel empathy and a desire to help, but you might also feel overwhelmed or exhausted by it.

Who is impacted?

Compassion fatigue occurs on a continuum. On every helping team there will be individuals who feel well and fulfilled in their work, while others feel some symptoms of CF, and a few



people who are so impacted that they may be secretly thinking about leaving the profession. In a study done in 2005, the National Survey of the Work and Health of Nurses found that over 50% of nurses had taken time off of work

because of a physical illness, and 10% had been away for mental health reasons. The good news is that eight out of ten nurses received help from their EAP (Employee Assistance Program).

Stigma

Unfortunately, some helpers feel stigma (disgrace or shame) for experiencing compassion fatigue. Some people believe that co-workers and leaders may think that if they are feeling compassion fatigue, it means they are not taking good care of themselves. This can silence people into hiding their symptoms instead of talking about it and getting the support they need.



Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is often characterized by deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a pronounced change in the helper’s ability to feel empathy for their clients or patients, and even for their co-workers.

Common symptoms of compassion fatigue include:

- Physical and emotional exhaustion, trouble sleeping and/or headaches

- Reduced feelings of sympathy and/or empathy
- Dreading certain clients or patients; then feeling guilty about it
- Feeling angry, irritable, cynical, critical and anxious
- Problems in professional or interpersonal relationships and/or job performance
- Reduced sense of accomplishment
- Decreased sense of enjoyment from work
- Increased absenteeism
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Isolating or feeling disconnected

Learning to recognize symptoms can help lessen the impact of compassion fatigue. Having a toolbox of strategies to combat compassion fatigue is helpful to mitigating it and preventing negative effects on your life.

Your Compassion Fatigue Toolbox

Everyone, but especially those in helping roles, needs to have an arsenal of effective self-care tools. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Effective Self-Care Strategies** - Self-care is an essential priority; it is not a luxury. Get regular exercise, eat a healthy diet and practice healthy sleep hygiene. Schedule days off, use 10 minute daily mindful meditations and spend as much time outdoors as possible.
2. **A few good friends** - Social connections help prevent isolation and depression. Find ways to schedule time in your week to spend with good friends doing things such as video chats, dinner dates (even

virtual dinner dates) and taking (social distancing) walks together.

3. **Humor** - Every good tool kit must include humor. Spend time looking up funny memes, videos and pictures and share them with your friends and family as well.
4. **Hobbies** - Take time to work on your current hobbies or develop new ones. Engage in activities that are enjoyable to you, improves your quality of life and reduces the risk of compassion fatigue.
5. **EAP** - Speak with an employee assistance counselor if you're noticing symptoms of compassion fatigue. Counselors not only understand compassion fatigue, but they can help you find ways to de-stress and maintain healthy balance in your life.



Compassion fatigue is a normal part of life for those in helping professions, but it doesn't have to be! By taking good care of yourself and reaching

out for help when you need it, you can mitigate CF, and its effects, in your life.

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If you think you might be experiencing compassion fatigue, contact your Employee Assistance Program today. Services are free and confidential.

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