



# The Cost of Caring for Helping Professions

Helping professionals who listen to the stories of fear, pain, and suffering of others may feel similar fear, pain, and suffering because they care. Helping professionals in all therapeutic settings are especially vulnerable to “compassion fatigue” and include emergency care workers, counselors, teachers, school administrators, mental health professionals, medical professionals, clergy, advocate volunteers, and human service workers. The concept of compassion fatigue emerged only in the last several years in the professional literature. It represents the cost of caring both about, and for traumatized people. What we used to call “burnout” is now also labeled “compassion fatigue,” ongoing overwhelm, “secondary traumatization,” and “nervous exhaustion”.

Compassion fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to working with the suffering, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Professionals who work with people who are suffering, must contend with not only the normal stress or dissatisfaction of work, but also with the emotional and personal feelings for the suffering. Compassion fatigue is a state of tension and preoccupation with the individual or cumulative trauma of clients as manifested in one or more ways including re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance/numbing of reminders of the event, and persistent arousal. Although similar to critical incident stress (being traumatized by something you actually experience or see), with compassion fatigue helping professionals absorb the trauma through the eyes and ears of clients. It can be thought of as secondary post-traumatic stress.

There are human costs associated with compassion fatigue. It reflects physical, emotional, and spiritual fatigue or exhaustion that takes over a person and causes a decline in his or her 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's this constant outputting of compassion and caring over time that can lead to these feelings.

Compassion fatigue comes from a variety of sources. Although it often affects those working in care-giving professions - 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. 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. Over time, the ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through the overuse of skills expressing compassion. Caregivers may also experience emotional blunting, reacting to situations differently than others would normally expect. Compassion fatigue occurs when caregivers become emotionally drained from hearing about and being exposed to the pain and trauma of the people they are helping.