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Compassion Fatigue

MENTAL HEALTH SERIES



What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue can be defined as the behaviors and emotions that **naturally arise** from empathizing with an individual going through a significant traumatic event. These behaviors and emotions result from the stress of wanting to help the suffering person.

Consistent with any type of exhaustion or fatigue, compassion fatigue **will reduce one's ability or desire to help others**.

It can be described as **"the cost of caring"**.

What does this mean for parents?

Parents can be in a position where they are in direct contact with those who are suffering from mental illness: their children. Parents are required to protect their children from harm, financially support their children, give their children basic life necessities, and provide a safe environment for their children to develop and mature. Additionally, parents face their own mental setbacks and life challenges. This mountain of responsibility can cause an extreme amount of stress that parents might not feel equipped to handle. Even though parents are giving it their all, these stressors can make them feel like their empathy tank is running low. This increases their risk for experiencing compassion fatigue.

Empathy is a **CORE COMPETENCY** of parents, but Compassion Fatigue can lead to parents feeling emotionally exhausted and detached from their child's feelings. Nina Kaiser, Ph.D., a child psychologist in San Francisco, states that "parents with compassion fatigue are often less patient with stressors that would usually sail past them". Comforting your child or taming a tantrum can feel like running a never-ending marathon.

Have you ever said to yourself?

I want to **empathize** with my child.

I am **not equipped** to handle the challenges my child is facing.

I want to be **"present" and attentive** when having serious conversations with my children.

I want to **help my family** improve its mental health.

If yes, you are likely to experience compassion fatigue.

9 SIGNS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE

1. Signs of physical anxiety such as breathing difficulties, muscle tension, and digestive problems
2. A sense of hopelessness
3. A decreased ability to empathize
4. Irritability and impatience
5. Decreased productivity and job satisfaction
6. A reduced ability to feel pleasure
7. Trouble sleeping
8. An urge to isolate yourself from others
9. Self-doubt and reduced self-esteem

Compassion Fatigue

To restore balance, one must first acknowledge their OWN needs

Compassion fatigue could inflict feelings of shame in some parents, making some feel bad for not wanting to help their child or for feeling worn out. In this case, it is important to acknowledge that compassion fatigue is caused by an exposure to suffering, not a "lack of love".

Self-awareness as a method of self-care might help to alleviate the impact of compassion fatigue and these feelings of shame. Parents who took a 15-week course that emphasized **stress reduction techniques** and the use of **mindfulness** in clinical practice had significant improvements in therapeutic relationships and counseling skills. Additionally, studies have shown that Compassion Fatigue was lower in those who self-reported their physical and mental health as "excellent".

It is time for parents to help their child by taking time to focus on themselves. This requires the frequent use of coping resources including social support, self-esteem, and health-promotion strategies.

Parents **NEED** balance. Parents need to **rest and nourish** their mind-body-spirit.

| Compassion Fatigue Risk Factors | Compassion Satisfaction Supporters |
|---|--|
| High expectations of work | Adjusting expectations in response to reality |
| Idealistic worldviews | Focusing on the good |
| The view that self-care is selfish | Accepting the bad |
| A lack of strong personal boundaries | Viewing self-care as essential to mental and physical health |
| An overdeveloped sense of personal responsibility | Setting compassionate boundaries |

"Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment."

Brené Brown

Need help improving your own mental health?



ParentGuidance.org offers several free courses to help improve your own self-compassion, mindfulness, and coping skills to handle anxiety and daily stressors.

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