

Client Advisory

Clinical Wellness Specialty Practice

Compassion Fatigue: Beyond Burnout

Addressing emotional exhaustion
in the care-providing workplace

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Introduction

Most people are familiar with the concept of experiencing “burn out”: long hours, heavy workloads, and stress that can lead to loss of job satisfaction and decreased health status. But for people working in roles where they are providing care and empathy, the emotional and mental exhaustion of this responsibility can go beyond burnout and affect many dimensions of their sense of being. It is not a lack of healthy choices or awareness of their own status, rather a sense of mental and emotional exhaustion that can begin a cycle that causes their health to deteriorate. Creating well-being programs and fostering a healthy culture for these populations requires a unique approach to address a condition known as “compassion fatigue”.

Compassion Fatigue vs. Burn Out

Although it is not often discussed in well-being, compassion fatigue is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time”. While this may appear similar to burn out (and they can co-exist), they are distinct. According to the American Institute of Stress, physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, isolation, and reduced sense of accomplishment are symptoms that occur with both conditions. However, compassion fatigue also includes more complex symptoms, such as the disruption of one’s cognitive abilities, belief systems, and changes in the intensity and ability to control their emotions. While this used to be viewed as a condition that affected people in caregiver roles, exposure to the trauma of others has become more commonplace. Social workers, teachers, community workers, emergency response personnel, familial caregivers, and other such “helper” roles are also susceptible to experiencing the spectrum of symptoms from both conditions.

While these people are dedicated to the caring of others, over time, their own self-care suffers as a result. Insomnia, overeating, fatigue, and substance abuse

caused by compassion fatigue can lead to increased health risks, while the psychological impacts can interfere with job performance and morale. People who are responsible for the care for others are also less likely to identify when they are struggling or to ask for help for their own needs.

Care for the Caregiver

In 2008, the United States Army Institute of Surgical Research at Fort Sam Houston launched a program to address the needs of caregivers for wounded soldiers, called “Care for the Caregiver”. Designed specifically to identify and treat compassion fatigue, through this program it was observed how the caregivers of wounded service member experienced signs of trauma, but without directly experiencing a traumatic eventⁱ. With the proper identification and treatment results have been promising, with demonstrated timely improvements in symptomsⁱⁱ.

ABCs of SELF CARE

Awareness: Knowing the signs and symptoms and note any changes

Balance: Make physical and emotional health a priority; seek support where needed

Connection: Maintain and/or re-establish connections to community, family, friends, and life purpose

Source: Military Families Learning Network, Brian Bride, Ph.D., professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia

Signs and Symptoms

Physical

- Insomnia
- Feeling ill or in pain often
- Decreased self-care (hygiene, appearance, fitness)

Mental and emotional

- Apathy
- Feeling hopeless
- Feelings of numbness and isolation
- Violent thoughts
- Substance abuse
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Impairments in judgement and cognitive abilities
- Struggles with beliefs, feelings of security, trust, and intimacy

Solutions for Employers

Encourage awareness:

- Administer the Professional Quality of Life Questionnaire (PROQOL), developed specifically to measure compassion fatigue (available in 17 different languages at proqol.org)
- Provide signage, lunch and learns, and email campaigns to educate employees on resources available (resources available from proqol.org and employee assistance programs)
- Recognize that all industries can be afflicted with compassion fatigue, as many employees are caring for children and aging family members

Environment

- Review policies, mission statement, and company values to ensure they are conducive to employees practicing self-care and achieving adequate work/life balance
- Provide comprehensive well-being programs for activity, stress management, and healthful eating
- Organize company events and clubs for hiking/walking, yoga, gardening, and other activities that promote stress relief and reflection
- Make the healthy choice the easier choice by encouraging healthy cafeteria/vending options, breaks for physical activity, and tobacco free workplaces
- Provide a quiet area for employees to have a mental “time out”

Consider the addition of the following benefits:

- Digital, telephonic, and on-site emotional resilience programs and programs specialized in compassion fatigue
- Services to make day-to-day life easier (back-up child care and elder care services, subsidies for healthy meal delivery programs)
- PTO day for self-care

Conclusion

While providing care for others can be fulfilling, the on-going stress can be mentally, emotionally, and physically depleting. Addressing the unique challenges facing caregivers can help them to not only take better care of their own health and well-being, but can also positively impact their productivity and satisfaction in the workplace.

¹ Hayes, Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel). “Compassion Fatigue in the Military Caregiver. U.S. Army War College, 2009.

² Gentry, “Compassion Fatigue: A Crucible of Transformation,” 29.