

Compassion fatigue, also known as second-hand shock and secondary stress reaction, describes a type of stress that results from helping or wanting to help those who are traumatized or under significant emotional duress.

UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE

Although compassion fatigue is sometimes called burnout, it is a slightly different concept.

- Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue is highly treatable and may be less predictable. The onset of compassion fatigue can be sudden, whereas burnout usually emerges over time. Additionally, severe cases of burnout sometimes require the person experiencing it to change jobs or occupations, but often measures can be taken to prevent or treat compassion fatigue before a change in work environment is required.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SYMPTOMS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Compassion fatigue can take a physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional toll on people who experience it.

Common symptoms of compassion fatigue include:

- Chronic physical and emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Feelings of inequity toward the therapeutic or caregiver relationship
- Irritability
- Feelings of self-contempt
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss
- Headaches
- Poor job satisfaction

HOW CAN COMPASSION FATIGUE BE PREVENTED?

Practicing self-awareness and self-monitoring to recognize changes in behavior, work, and life outside of work is the first step to preventing compassion fatigue. Developing either informal or formal supervisory and mentor relationships within your work environment can also help you spot when you are being affected by compassion fatigue. These practices can also help prevent compassion fatigue:

- Reducing stressful workloads
- Monitoring sleep patterns
- Taking regular vacations
- Meditation
- Journaling
- Seeking personal therapy to process work problems
- Regular exercise

DO YOU RECOGNIZE THIS IN YOURSELF? WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

1. GET EDUCATED

- If you know you are at risk for compassion fatigue, taking the time to learn the signs and symptoms can be a helpful means of prevention.
- If you think you may be experiencing compassion fatigue, you can take a compassion fatigue self-assessment developed by the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project [here](#).

2. PRACTICE SELF-CARE

- Practicing [self-care](#) can be a critical method of protecting yourself against compassion fatigue. It is not uncommon for those who are constantly concerned with the needs of others to wind up neglecting their own.

3. SET EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

- It can be especially important for therapists, social workers, nurses, and caregivers alike to set firm emotional [boundaries](#) to protect themselves. Empathy and compassion are generally at the forefront of a human services career.
- The challenge is to remain compassionate, empathetic, and supportive of others without becoming overly involved and taking on another's pain. Setting emotional boundaries helps maintain a connection while still remembering and honoring the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs.

4. ENGAGE IN OUTSIDE HOBBIES

- Studies have shown work-life balance is becoming more important to workers, and making time for leisure activities and personal hobbies outside of work can help lower stress levels and improve overall life satisfaction.

5. CULTIVATE HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS OUTSIDE OF WORK

- It can sometimes be difficult for co-workers to avoid talking about work even outside the workplace. Connecting with friends who are not aware of the ins and outs of your work situation can provide much needed emotional and professional relief.

6. KEEP A JOURNAL

- Taking the time to cultivate self-awareness and connect with your personal thoughts and feelings can help prevent suppression of emotions, which can lead to compassion fatigue over time.

7. BOOST YOUR RESILIENCY

- [Resilience](#) is our ability to bounce back from stress. While some people seem to naturally be more resilient than others, resilience is a skill that can be learned and cultivated.
- Resilience is something that can be learned, and enhancing or boosting it can reduce the effects of compassion fatigue as new coping methods are learned."

8. USE POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

- While it may be tempting to wash away the stress and emotional burdens of your job with alcohol or drugs, this can actually work in the reverse and compound stress in the long run.
- Consider making a list of positive coping strategies to use in times of stress. This might include deep breathing, [meditation](#), taking a walk, talking with a friend, watching a funny movie, or relaxing in a hot bath.

9. IDENTIFY WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

Some workplace strategies that have been proven to be beneficial are:

- Support groups and open discussions about compassion fatigue in the workplace
- Regular breaks
- Routine check-ins
- Mental health days
- Onsite counseling
- Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

10. SEEK PERSONAL THERAPY

- If you find yourself feeling emotionally vulnerable, significantly stressed, or overwhelmed, consider [seeing a therapist](#) who can help you process your feelings and implement strategies to help you combat compassion fatigue and maintain a healthy work-life balance.