

## Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue and its symptoms are very real workplace issues, and as they can result from working closely with those who are suffering, it would be helpful for our clients who are in care-giving roles, both formally and informally, to have an understanding of what compassion fatigue is, how to recognise it in yourself and others, and what you can do about it.

### What is Compassion Fatigue?

Broadly speaking, compassion fatigue is a condition that can include emotional, physical, and spiritual distress in those providing care to another, causing a decline in their ability to experience joy or to feel and care for others. As opposed to critical incident stress, which is being traumatised by something you actually experience or see, compassion fatigue is absorbing the trauma through the eyes and ears of others, resulting in very real emotional and physical symptoms in the care-giver themselves. This is why compassion fatigue is often also known as the 'cost of caring' and 'a hazard of the helping professions'.

### How to recognise it

The most critical need initially is for carers to be aware of the warning signs and recognise that they may be experiencing symptoms. These can include:

#### *Emotional symptoms*

- Feeling overwhelmed, helpless or powerless when hearing of others' suffering
- Bottling up emotions
- Anger, irritability, sadness, anxiety
- Feeling emotionally, psychologically or physically exhausted, burnt out or numb
- Feeling hypersensitive or insensitive to stories we hear or see.

#### *Behavioural symptoms*

- Self-isolation and withdrawal
- Poor coping behaviours, such as self-medicating and substance use
- Relationship conflict
- Being less efficient or productive at work
- Reduced pleasure in activities we used to enjoy or reduced work satisfaction.

#### *Cognitive symptoms*

- Constant thinking or dwelling on the suffering of others
- Constant self-blame or thoughts of "I should or could have done more"
- Changes in belief systems, such as belief about self, others, the world, the future, or meaning in life
- Reduced sense of personal and occupational accomplishment or efficacy
- Difficulty concentrating, focusing or making decisions.

#### *Physical symptoms*

- Feeling constantly tired
- Poor self-care
- Nausea, dizziness, headaches
- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- Being tense, agitated, on edge.

### What you can do about it

There are many hands-on things we can do to mitigate the feelings and symptoms of compassion fatigue. Awareness is the first step to taking control.

1. Most importantly, refocus on yourself. Before anyone can tend to and be sensitive to the needs of others, they have to take care of their own well-being.
2. Make self-care a priority – it's not an indulgence, it's a necessity. Check out our suggestions for [taking a few minutes for self-care](#). Add your own ideas to the list.

3. Consciously take note of how you are feeling and your stress levels. Make a habit of doing this so that you will be alert to any less-positive changes and can take action before things get out of hand.
4. Know what it takes to revitalise and replenish yourself. You might like to try the Aim for Balance exercise in our [Managing Your Mood](#) blog.
5. Be mindful of isolating yourself. Share how you are feeling with someone you trust; a good friend, your manager, an EAP practitioner.

*"It's not the load that breaks us down, it's the way we carry it."*

*Lou Holtz*

