

## Compassion Fatigue— The Cost of Caring

### What is Compassion Fatigue?

The term “compassion fatigue” is sometimes used interchangeably with vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, or simply “stress” or burnout. In its truest sense, compassion fatigue is the physical, mental, and/or emotional exhaustion experienced by individuals in intense caregiving roles. It may show up as excessive worry or attempts to control things, lack of energy, sleep disturbance, irritability, interpersonal conflicts, or in the form of physical complaints.

People are usually drawn to caregiving roles—as professionals or within a family—out of good intentions and a desire to help and support. Being able to empathize, be present with people during times of illness, loss or tragedy, and “feel others’ pain” often make caregivers good at what they do. Over time, however, especially if caring for others is not balanced with self-care, those in the helping professions may begin taking on others’ distress and be at risk of developing compassion fatigue.

### How can I tell if my employees are at risk?

If your employees are in roles that serve others—most notably in healthcare, but also those who support frontline caregivers, patients’ family members, or the general public— it may be inevitable that they develop symptoms of compassion fatigue at some time. Workloads only tend to increase, as does the overwhelming complexity of the stressors workers are expected to manage. To compound matters, adequate training, resources, and support often cannot keep pace with the volume and difficulty of today’s workplace demands. Problems in the workplace and with those seeking help commonly mirror society at large—escalating violence, increased economic instability, addictions, and a blurring of boundaries with our 24/7 information overload.

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### *from your Affiliated Employee Assistance Program (EAP)*

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1.800.769.9819  
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Affiliated EAP offers many **educational programs** designed to help leaders become more effective in supervising their staff. For a complete course listing or to schedule training, contact us or visit our website.

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## Why is it important to address compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue can be cumulative. Caught early on it may be a helpful indicator that employees need to get back on track with self-care and more balanced living. Early intervention means the sufferer will likely still have the energy to take positive action such as increasing physical exercise, healthy eating, good sleep habits, and connecting with positive social supports. Left unaddressed compassion fatigue may interfere with employees' productivity, attitudes, relationships, and overall wellbeing. Ultimately compassion fatigue may lead to withdrawal and an inability for those affected to provide the focused, compassionate care they once did.

## What can I do to support employees?

Supervisors are in a particularly good position to notice and intervene in regards to employees' compassion fatigue. Ironically people in the helping professions are often experts at giving care but hesitant to seek

help for themselves. Their reluctance may stem from employees being too depleted, lacking the skills to recognize their own limitations, or simply believing they should be able to take care of themselves as they take care of others.

Supervisors can support employees' efforts to prevent and manage compassion fatigue in both small and significant ways. They can communicate openly and regularly to de-mystify the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue. Managers can also ensure that difficult workplace incidents are followed by de-briefing sessions where employees have the opportunity to share their concerns and receive support from leaders and one another. Your employee assistance professionals are trained to support employees and leaders at all levels of the organization. They are ready to respond quickly and compassionately when tragic events impact the workplace.

Perhaps even more critical than caring for employees who have become overwhelmed, supervisors



can help create a culture built on preventing physical and emotional exhaustion by providing opportunities for workers to learn the basics of stress management and personal resiliency. They can encourage and model healthy daily practices—a critical behavior since so much of what we learn is by observing others, especially those in visible positions.

We live and work in challenging times. Our best chance to get through the storms and remain resilient is to grow strong “roots” through the practice of positive daily habits, and to encourage those we work with to do the same.

## Strategies for Leaders:

- Communicate often about the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue
- Make de-briefing after difficult workplace events common practice
- Give employees opportunities to learn the basics of good self-care
- Model behaviors that help prevent and bounce back from compassion fatigue, and encourage employees to do the same

**EAP CAN HELP!** Your EAP is a confidential, assessment, short-term counseling and referral program for you and your family members. It is a free benefit provided to you by your organization. Call **1.800.769.9819** ~ TTY dial 711 for VRS then dial **800.769.9819**

### **Online Work/Life Services**

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Resources: [hbr.org/2011/06/building-a-resilient-organization](http://hbr.org/2011/06/building-a-resilient-organization)