

COMPASSION FATIGUE

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*Do not sacrifice yourself to help others.
Increase yourself to help others. Your
service and caregiving is a gift that
should be nurtured and preserved.
Be intentional and diligent about your
own self-care.*

-BEVERLY KYER

I am here to help you as you help others



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DID YOU KNOW?

Compassion fatigue is a significant risk for anyone in a caregiving role. Those supporting individuals with long-term or life-limiting illnesses—professionally or personally—are particularly vulnerable. Studies show a large number of caregivers experience at least some degree of compassion fatigue.

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Also described as “Running on Empty” or “the cost of caring,” compassion fatigue refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion that comes from caring for others in pain. (Figley, 1982)

Caregiving—whether in a professional role or as a family member—is deeply rewarding but can also take a toll. Constant exposure to suffering can erode empathy and joy, potentially leading to depression, secondary traumatic stress, and stress-related illnesses.

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.” – Remen



4 Stages of Compassion Fatigue:

1



Empathetic Ability
wanting to alleviate
someone else's pain.

2



Empathetic Response
helping someone else
alleviate their pain.

3



Compassion Stress
anxiety or burn out
from overextending
compassion/care.

4



Compassion Fatigue
when compassion
stress isn't managed,
it leads to fatigue that
must be coped with.

Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout



Feature	Compassion Fatigue	Burnout
DEFINITION	Exhaustion from prolonged exposure to others' suffering	Chronic workplace stress leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced efficacy
FOCUS	Primarily on empathetic engagement with others' trauma	Related to work stressors and organizational factors
ONSET	Can occur suddenly or gradually due to exposure to trauma	Develops gradually from prolonged workplace stress
SYMPTOMS	Emotional exhaustion, reduced empathy, intrusive thoughts	Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, reduced efficiency

Who is Affected?

Compassion fatigue is an occupational hazard for anyone who cares for others, including family caregivers and health professionals.

Statistics from the 2005 National Survey of the Work and Health of Nurses (Canada):

Nearly 1 in 5 nurses reported mental health challenges affecting their workload.

Over 50% of nurses took time off for physical illness; 10% for mental health reasons.

8 out of 10 nurses accessed employee assistance programs—double the rate of the general workforce.

High levels of emotional exhaustion and low personal accomplishment were reported by 50% of physicians and one-third of cancer care professionals.

Signs and Symptoms

Everyone experiences compassion fatigue differently, but common signs include:

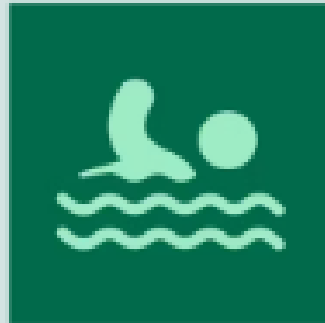
- Chronic physical or emotional exhaustion
- Reduced empathy or compassion
- Irritability, anger, or anxiety
- Dread of providing care
- Increased substance use (alcohol, drugs)
- Sleep disturbances, headaches, poor appetite
- Withdrawal from social or personal interests
- Difficulty separating work and personal life

Tip: Track your symptoms on a scale from 1–10. Identify early warning signs (e.g., “I know I’m at an 8 when I start avoiding calls or skipping social activities”) so you can take action before it worsens.

Ways to Cope with Compassion Fatigue



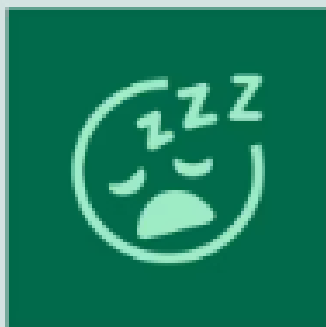
**Reduce &
Manage Stress**



**Exercise
Regularly**



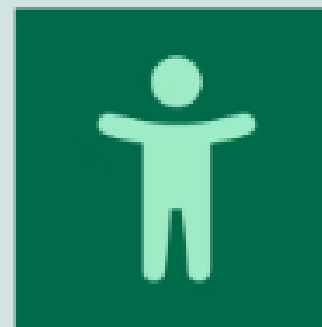
Eat Healthy



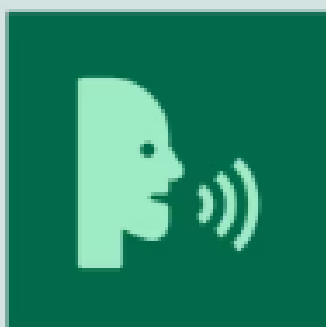
**Get Quality
Rest**



**Sign Up For A
Caregiving
Support Group**



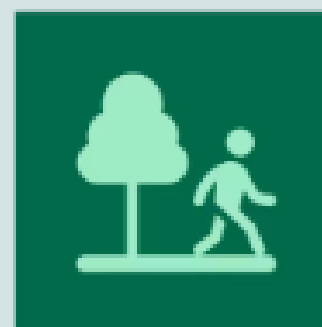
**Practice Self-
Compassion**



**Set Firm
Emotional
Boundaries**



**Consider
Resilience
Training**



**Schedule
Respite Care**

Prevention Strategies

Organizational Approaches

- Openly discuss and normalize compassion fatigue in the workplace.
- Encourage supportive environments: peer support, regular breaks, mental health days, and manageable workloads.
- Consider part-time client interactions or mixed duties to reduce emotional strain.

Personal Approaches

- Prioritize self-care: exercise, hobbies, meditation, or relaxation activities.
- Assess life balance: are your activities nourishing or depleting?
- Avoid relying on unhealthy coping strategies (alcohol, overworking, gambling).

Develop a personal Prevention Toolkit:

- Identify your warning signs and stress level scale.
- Schedule regular check-ins with yourself or a trusted colleague.
- List stress-relief and resiliency strategies that work for you (yoga, breathing exercises, walks, massage).

When Additional Support is Needed

If compassion fatigue leads to severe depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts, professional help is essential. Options may include counseling, therapy, or workplace support programs. Treatment should address both mental health symptoms and early detection to prevent relapse.

Supporting Others

Show empathy and avoid blame. Recognize that compassion fatigue is a natural response to challenging work conditions. Encourage open conversations about workload and emotional impact.

Conclusion

Compassion fatigue develops gradually, and recovery is also a process. True prevention and healing require lifestyle adjustments and prioritizing health and wellness—sometimes a vacation isn't enough.

How Alberta Northwest Palliative Care Society Can Help:

- Workshops promoting mental wellness and self-care for caregivers
- Specialized sessions on Compassion Fatigue, Self-Care, and Setting Boundaries
- Access to literature and external resources
- Support for healthcare professionals in managing workload and emotional stress



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