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Combating Compassion Fatigue with Self-Care and Wellness



As a young psychologist and first responder, Dr. Charles Figley worked with wounded warriors after the Vietnam War. He then realized he was taking on the soldiers' traumatic experiences as though they were his own. In 1995, he coined the phrase compassion fatigue. Figley, a professor and founder of the Traumatology Institute at Tulane University, describes it as: "an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper."

Compassion fatigue can occur to anyone who has a career or life focused on helping and healing others, particularly those in distress. It can be seen in those working as psychologists, social workers, nurses, physicians, first responders, volunteers, animal welfare workers, or any caregiving capacity when one focuses much of their energy outward. As a result, their own self-care may suffer.

Signs and Symptoms

It is important to be aware of the signs and symptoms in order to recognize these in yourself or someone else. They can include:

- Feeling emotionally and physically exhausted
- Isolating from others
- Physical problems due to stress, overdoing it, or lack of self-care
- Outward focus rather than putting oneself first
- Substance abuse struggles
- Feelings of depression or apathy
- Flashbacks, recurring nightmares, or intrusive thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating and loss of productivity
- Loss of hope and feeling like one's contributions don't matter
- Causes of Compassion Fatigue

Patricia Smith, founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, describes how some individuals are more prone to compassion fatigue than others due to patterns that start in early childhood. Some people might learn at a young age to be a caregiver and never learn the importance of taking care of themselves. This personality trait might attract the individual to a helping career.

These types of people are constantly giving to others until they have nothing left, and their tank is on empty. Other factors that could contribute to a pattern of putting others first include lack of personal boundaries, unresolved trauma, and feeling responsible to constantly help others.

Caregivers Need Self-Care Too

Caregivers need to be in a state of wellness to succeed at caregiving and avoid compassion fatigue. Psychologist Amy Williams, PhD, believes there are five crucial aspects of self-care, including getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, exercising, having relaxation time, and having social support.

Caregivers can improve their quality of life and increase their levels of happiness by directing their attention inward and taking more time to care for themselves. Often, we might feel like there aren't enough hours in the day to fit in all we need to do. However, self-care is an essential ingredient to a healthy life. Until we properly take care of ourselves, we cannot be an effective caregiver for others.

Here are some tips for dealing with compassion fatigue:

- Slow down and make self-care a priority
- Try to strike more of a balance between caring for yourself and others
- Create a clear separation between your personal and professional life
- Don't be afraid to ask for help—don't try to hold the weight of the world on your shoulders
- Connect with colleagues who can relate to your experience
- Practice mindfulness by being completely present in whatever you are doing in each moment
- Be grateful for yourself and what you contribute to the world