



UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE



What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is described as a deep physical and emotional exhaustion where the caregivers begin to feel the pain and suffering of the people that they are caring for (Day, 2014). Individuals who work with trauma victims and people who are suffering from emotional or physical pain, and chronic illness (e.g., therapists, psychologists, nurses) traditionally experience compassion fatigue. Those that work in professions with direct exposure to traumatic events, such as first responders, are also prone to compassion fatigue. However, more recent findings have shown that many of those who work as family caregivers also experience the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue. This results in a change in the caregiver's ability to feel compassion for friends, loved ones, or family members they are helping.

What Causes Compassion Fatigue?

The responsibility of caring for others requires empathy for an individual's emotional and physical pain. These ongoing empathic responses can leave a caregiver vulnerable to being affected by the same stressors as the individual they are caring for. In addition to the challenges of providing care to others, caregivers might have their own life stressors to deal with such as balancing work and personal time, caring for other family members, financial costs to providing the care, and limited support from others while taking care of a loved one. All of these stressors put added strain on a caregiver, leaving them very little time to recharge from the challenges and responsibilities they face each day (Sabo, 2011).

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

It's very important that caregivers learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue to alert them that something is not right when it comes to their own health.

Some common signs and symptoms that both professional and family caregivers may experience include:

- Mental and physical exhaustion
- Difficulty separating roles and responsibilities
- Reduced sense of enjoyment or disinterest in helping others
- Inability to feel sympathy and empathy for their loved one
- Increased anger, irritability or sadness
- Heightened anxiety, irrational fears, and difficulty concentrating
- No longer finding activities enjoyable and isolating oneself from others
- Recurring nightmares and flashbacks about the caregiving they have provided
- Compulsive behaviours such as overspending, overeating, or gambling
- Increased use of alcohol and/or reliance on drugs to cope with the stress of providing care
- Chronic physical problems such as gastrointestinal issues and getting sick more often
- Denying that there's a problem



WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP PREVENT COMPASSION FATIGUE?

The most important thing that can help to reduce the chance of experiencing compassion fatigue is for individuals to educate themselves on the signs and symptoms. By identifying these early on, it will help to reduce the chances of a much more serious health condition. The signs and symptoms will act as warning signals that an individual might be at risk of experiencing compassion fatigue and should look at getting help. If you are a caregiver, the following strategies can also help you prevent the development of compassion fatigue:

Take Care of Your Own Health: Many caregivers become focused on taking care of others and forget to take care of their own health needs. It's important to be physically active, choose healthier foods, get enough sleep, balance work and leisure activities, and take care of your mental and emotional health needs.

Learn to Set Emotional Boundaries: The challenge for many caregivers is the high level of empathy that is required to attend to a patient's pain, suffering, and traumatic experiences. This is especially problematic for family caregivers because of the close emotional bond they have with a loved one. However, it's still important that you set some boundaries when it comes to your own emotions and needs when caring for an individual.

Practice Positive Coping Strategies: Individuals who are feeling the stress and emotional burdens of being a caregiver are at risk of turning to poor coping strategies, such as drinking alcohol or using drugs. Look for strategies that lead to positive outcomes to help you cope, such as deep breathing exercises, meditation, taking a walk, spending time with a friend, having a relaxing bath, or watching a funny movie.

If you have tried various coping strategies and you are still feeling any of the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue, you should talk to your healthcare provider to see how they can help. The challenge for many caregivers is to remember that the ability to provide care for others will be decreased if you are not taking care of yourself.



Reference:

Day, J. R., Anderson, R. A., & Davis, L. L. (2014). *Compassion Fatigue in Adult Daughter Caregivers of a Parent with Dementia*. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 35(10), 796–804. <http://doi.org/10.3109/01612840.2014.917133>

Sabo, B., (2011) Reflecting on the concept of compassion fatigue . *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 16(1), Manuscript 1.