

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2019 Edition

Feature

Compassion Fatigue: Another Epidemic in Today's Workplace

Faster recovery when recognized and treated early

Tired, fatigued and stressed, Sarah, an HR leader in a health care facility, has felt this way for much of her 15 year career. She spent countless hours staring blankly at her computer screen, numb and too tired to focus on the flood of emails from unhappy employees and managers dealing with workplace challenges, grievances and harassment investigations.



Charmaine
Hammond
CSP, MA
*Co-Founder,
Raise a Dream*

What is the cost of caring?

Also called "vicarious traumatization" or secondary traumatization (Figley, 1995), compassion fatigue can be understood as the "emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. It differs from burnout, but can coexist. Compassion fatigue can occur due to exposure on one case or can be due to a "cumulative" level of trauma. Burnout (while it might look and feel somewhat similar) is the emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress. Burnout is not trauma-related or the result of caring for others.

Some of the similarities of burnout and compassion fatigue include:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion and feeling of being completely run down
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work
- Depersonalization and isolation
- Reduced coping skills to handle daily stress and challenges

The clear difference between burnout and compassion fatigue is that compassion fatigue has a more rapid onset while burnout emerges over a longer period of time. Also, compassion fatigue has a faster recovery and is typically less severe, when recognized and addressed early.

Some of the symptoms of compassion fatigue with Sarah included:

- ◇ Decline in her overall well-being
- ◇ Isolating herself (not taking breaks with her colleagues, taking breaks alone in her office)
- ◇ Insomnia — Difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep
- ◇ Her emotional state was more pronounced and intense
- ◇ Solving problems became challenging (felt like brain fog)
- ◇ Her self-esteem had declined and she frequently questioned her decisions and actions
- ◇ Increased feelings of anger and frustration in workplace situations

As Sarah looked back over the past few years, she began to see that compassion fatigue had developed over time — the past several years. Her experience may be different from others affected by compassion fatigue. Over time and as compassion fatigue develops, your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion. You also might experience an emotional blunting where you react to situations differently than one would normally expect.

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So how do you ward off compassion fatigue and stay resilient? The Landstuhl Regional Medical Center offers the following suggestions:

- Find someone to talk to.
- Consider taking some time off work.
- Understand that the pain you feel is normal.
- Exercise and eat properly, drink lots of water and ensure you get enough sleep.

Sarah took a well deserved 3-week vacation, joined her local book club as she loves to read and reduced the amount of time she stayed late at work. She and her colleagues formed a lunch walking club at work. These daily walks had a significant impact on her energy level and she no longer felt isolated and alone. The break from work and the healthy changes to her lifestyle certainly helped her overcome the compassion fatigue and get back to working productively which she had not experienced for a long time.

Charmaine Hammond is President of Hammond International Inc. She is an expert in collaboration, communication and conflict management and can be reached via email at charmaine@hammondgroup.biz.