Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma: Helping Ourselves to Help Others

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Introduction

- Our work is technically demanding
- Our work also places demands on our humanity
- We must attend to ourselves in order to attend to our clients
Is there light at the end of the tunnel?
Caring for Others: How and why do we do it?

• Sympathy
  • An acknowledgment of, sensitivity to, or affinity with the feelings or hardship of another.
Caring for Others: How and why do we do it?

- Empathy
  - An identification with or vicarious experiencing of the thoughts, feelings, or situation of another person, and:
  - A strong desire to support another or relieve any discomfort related to them.
Compassion

- What is compassion?
- How is compassion different from sympathy and empathy?
Compassion

• An emotional response when perceiving suffering that involves an authentic desire to help.

• Derived from Latin and Greek roots “pati” and “pathein” meaning “to suffer” and the Latin root “com” meaning “with.”
Compassion as documented in human history

- **Christianity**: The Good Samaritan
- **Confucius**: Major teacher of the Golden Rule
- **Judaism**: “The 13 Attributes of Compassion”
- **Buddha**: “Loving kindness and compassion is all our practice.”
- **Dalai Lama**: Believed the individual experience of compassion radiates outward and increases harmony for all: “Compassion is a necessity, not a luxury…without it, humanity cannot survive.”
- **Charles Darwin**: Not survival of the fittest, but survival of the kindest. “Communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.” *(Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex, 1898)*
Simply put, Compassion is:

• The feeling of sorrow or concern for another coupled by the desire to alleviate the suffering:

• “I feel for you” + “I understand you” + “I want to help”
The “Cost of Caring”

- Work centered on the relief of suffering involves absorbing information about suffering, thus absorbing that suffering itself:
  - “secondary victimization”
  - “vicarious trauma” or “trauma by concern”
  - “Chiasmal trauma”: an entire system is affected by trauma to even one member
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Study of Compassion Fatigue</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>• Term was introduced by Joinson in 1992 and developed by Figley in 1995.</td>
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<td>• Figley developed a model for the process by which compassion fatigue develops.</td>
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<td>• Model has been used to describe development of symptoms across multiple care settings and among persons in different care roles.</td>
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Case Example

- The over-reactive nurse
Figley’s model of Compassion Fatigue

The Compassion Fatigue Process (Figley, 2001)
External Factors

• The Work Environment
  • Societal support
    • Public policy, regulations
    • Social acceptance, activism

• Work Setting
  • Physical environment
  • Employer values, culture
  • Job tasks, personnel guideline
  • Management, colleagues
The Effects of External Factors

• The “Six Futilities”
  • Perception of the Suffering
  • Patient demands
  • Institutional Demands
  • Communication, treatment errors
  • Feelings of inadequacy
  • Sense that the care is not benefitting the client
Also, Internal Factors have an impact

- The personal gift and curse of empathy
  - High empathy helps us understand *and* can challenge our equanimity
- Personal History/Personality
  - Our temperament
  - Family/social history
  - Personal boundaries
  - Unresolved personal trauma
  - Over-generalization: thinking others’ experiences are similar to ours
“Pathological Altruism”

A combination of:

- An excess of empathy
- An inability to self-regulate
- Being more focused on relieving one’s own discomfort than another’s
What Happens to Us?

“BURNOUT”

VS.

“COMPASSION FATIGUE”
“Burnout”

- Gradual physical, mental, emotional erosion due to long-term involvement in emotionally demanding or unfulfilling situations:
  - Exhaustion: physically, mentally drained
  - Depersonalization: feeling hardened or numb
  - Achievement Void: reduced accomplishment, satisfaction.
“Compassion Fatigue”

- Feels similarly to “burnout” but:
  - Emerges suddenly
  - Existential/spiritual effects: meaninglessness, worthlessness, hopelessness
  - A sense of isolation from supporters, hyper-vigilance or fear
  - Symptoms often disconnected from real cause
Signs and Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

• For the Individual:
  • Difficulty concentrating, pre-occupation, exhaustion
  • Nightmares/flashbacks
  • Over-reactions or avoidance of sensory/emotional stimuli
  • Chronic physical ailments: colds, stomach problems
  • Apathy, anhedonia
  • Excessive negativity: blaming others, complaining
  • Compulsive/avoidant behaviors: substance abuse, over-spending, over-eating, gambling
  • Problems in personal relationships, intimacy
  • Denial of difficulties or problems
Signs and Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue
WHY are we susceptible to Compassion Fatigue?

• Sympathetic Nervous System:
  • Fight, flight, or freeze
  • Is an adaptive response in real crises, but wilts us day in day out

• Parasympathetic Nervous System:
  • Restores physiological equanimity
  • Keeps you rooted, helps you tend and thrive
How do we protect ourselves?

- The antidote to vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue is:

RESILIENCE
Resilience
No Pressure.
Resiliency Skills
#1: Self-Awareness

- Self-Awareness
  - Physical, emotional
  - Technical
  - Existential

- Self-Awareness Tip: What’s going on in your body, mind, and spirit when you are working is often a clue/barometer of what’s going on in the minds of others.
Awareness:
Issues and Contributing factors

• What type of scenarios contribute to your stress level, increasing your vulnerability to compassion fatigue?

• What are the potential costs or consequences for ignoring compassion fatigue?
Resilience Skills: Self-Awareness, cont.

- Self-Awareness
  - Physical, emotional
  - Technical
  - Existential

- Questions to ask yourself:
  - What skills and knowledge bases are natural talents for you, and where might you put some effort into developing more?
  - What are your strengths, growing edges, and blind spots?
Resilience Skills
Self-Awareness, cont.

- Self-Awareness
  - Physical, emotional
  - Technical
  - Existential

- The nature of our work begs all the “big questions”

- Spend time consciously exploring your questions about life and death, truth and justice, good, evil

- Develop a language and a coping strategy to manage suffering, horror, tragedy, and to help find meaning
Resilience Skills
#2: Self-Regulation

- Self-Regulation
  - Boundaries
  - Values Clarification
  - Arousal Management
Resilience Skills
#3: Self-Care

- **Self-Care**
  - Eat well, exercise, and sleep
    - *Right for you!*
  - Have fun like your life depends on it
    - *It does!*
    - *Get “shallow, simple, and silly” for your health!*
  - Talking really does help
    - *With the right person!*
Take a moment:

• List one mini-escape or diversion that worked well to restore and renew you.

• List one thing that brings you joy.

• When was the last time you did it?

• What gets in the way of doing it more often?

• What are your personal triggers indicating it’s time to “recharge your battery?”
Resilience Skills
Self-Care, cont.

• **TALK IT OUT.**
  • Talking is one of the most effective ways of preventing and healing from compassion fatigue
  • Who you talk to is important
    • The person you choose should be someone who:
      • Can really relate
      • Can be present without interfering with your process
      • Doesn’t “one-up” you or switch to their story
      • Needs to understand and honor confidentiality!
  • Utilizing your EAP benefits
Resilience Skills

What about those External Factors?

- Ask yourself:
  - Am I (still) committed to:
    - The agency’s mission, values, culture
    - The physical environment/resources
    - The organizational structure
      - Lines of authority
      - Style of communication
    - My colleagues/managers/supervisors
Let’s revisit Figley’s model

The Compassion Fatigue Process (Figley, 2001)
Final Tips on Preventing Compassion Fatigue

• “Dig where the ground is soft” – Chinese proverb
  • Avoid your trickiest area to fix, and pick the issue you can most easily visualize changing/improving.
  • Example: Making a commitment to go for a walk during your lunch hour vs. getting rid of a difficult supervisor.
Prevention tips, cont.

• Take stock of what’s on your plate
  • Make a list of all the demands on your time and energy
  • Look at your list carefully; what stands out? What factors contribute to overflowing your plate? Brainstorm with a friend.

• Start a Self-Care collection
  • Ask friends what they do for self-care; start making your list – you may learn new things and new ideas!
Prevention tips, cont.
Final thoughts

- Poem:
  - “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye
References

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (2013)  
http://www.compassionfatigue.org


