



EXPERIENCING COMPASSION FATIGUE? YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

Ask a healthcare worker why they went into the medical field and you are likely to get a variety of answers, but one reason tends to be given more than any other: to help people.

Medicine isn't glamorous, it can be messy and stressful.. Sleepless nights and hours of paperwork are hard to get through without the driving force of compassion. But what happens when the caring starts to fade?

Compassion fatigue, as defined by Psychologist Charles Figley, PhD, is a state of emotional detachment and physical exhaustion experienced by individuals that work with victims of disasters, trauma, or illness, especially in the healthcare field. Having many names such as secondary traumatic stress, secondary victimization, vicarious traumatization, and compassion fatigue, was described in 1992 to express the detrimental impact hospital nurses were experiencing as a result of their daily exposure to patient emergencies. Those manifesting compassion fatigue have a variety of symptoms including decreased concentration, emotional withdrawal, feelings of helplessness, agitation, lack of self-satisfaction, and physical complaints such as aches and pains. Ultimately, these difficulties can lead to work absenteeism, depression, and anxiety.

Secondary traumatic stress does not occur overnight. "Compassion fatigue develops over time – taking weeks, sometimes years to surface... your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion," writes Frank Ochberg M.D., the psychiatrist who pioneered the study of Post Traumatic Distress Disorder

(PTSD). "You also might experience an emotional blunting – whereby you react to situations differently than one would normally expect."

Often the progression to symptomatic vicarious traumatization may be so gradual that those experiencing it may not notice the signs at first and the symptoms can easily be confused with other things. It is important for medical professionals to recognize compassion fatigue because repeated exposure to those facing trauma can negatively impact a healthcare worker's wellbeing. They are at an increased rate of making improper decisions such as misdiagnosis, poor treatment planning, or other medical errors than those not experiencing compassion fatigue. An emotionally drained caregiver can make mistakes that place the patients' health at risk and ultimately negatively affect the reputation of the establishment where the caregiver works.

The Professional Quality of Life (PROQOL) questionnaire, which was developed by Beth Hundall Stamm PhD, one of the world's leading experts on compassion fatigue, is a good assessment for identifying those at risk for secondary traumatic stress. Once compassion fatigue has been identified, the best next step is to seek professional help. While some sufferers try to work harder, ignoring the signs of fatigue, this rarely works and the symptoms escalate to anxiety, depression, and/or PTSD. Others try to self-medicate with alcohol or drug abuse, which can lead to deleterious outcomes for the sufferer and even their family and patients.

In recent years, professional resources like SafeHaven have emerged and today offer key programs to combat

compassion fatigue among physicians, PAs, nurses, pharmacists, and medical, nursing, PA, and pharmacy students. Driving the confidential support services at SafeHaven is a foundation built on self-care. And most importantly, the knowledge that self-care isn't selfish. It's essential.

To ensure SafeHaven has lasting impact, the unique program offers a variety of support options including WorkLife Concierge, a virtual assistant that can manage every day and special occasion tasks like meal delivery, home and auto services, child and elder care, and more. By elevating some of the everyday tasks of a healthcare worker outside of the care setting, WorkLife Concierge allows a stressed clinician an opportunity to prioritize important healing through

sleep, exercise, proper diet, and mindfulness. Therapy is also integral to secondary trauma healing and is a key aspect of SafeHaven's infrastructure including around the clock professional therapists available to assist. And lastly, peer support is an integral part of overcoming compassion fatigue. SafeHaven also offers peer coaching so clinicians can speak to people who understand their profession and day-to-day.

Compassion fatigue is not something that has to be faced alone. Together, we must prioritize healing our healers. [Learn more here.](#)



Melina Davis
The Medical Society of Virginia
CEO and EVP

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