

**Combating Burnout and Compassion Fatigue:
Increasing Compassion Satisfaction and Renewing Passion for Our Work
Creative Wellbeing Workshops, LLC**

How do we battle burnout and compassion fatigue and maintain our energy and enjoyment for our work?

“The door that nobody else will go in, seems always to swing open widely for me.” Clara Barton

Qualities and Strengths of Healthcare Workers

Healthcare professionals come to our work with unique strengths and abilities. Other professions may call upon similar strengths, such as compassion or flexibility, but rarely the constellation of qualities that allows us to manage the high intensity work of caring for the lives of others. What qualities do most health care workers exhibit?

- Desire to help others
- Flexibility
- Commitment to public welfare
- Investment in pursuing and developing specialized knowledge and training
- Ability to cope with high intensity situations
- Natural propensity to take care of others

Challenges in Healthcare

Although healthcare can be very rewarding, there are certain challenges that make the work more likely to induce burnout and increase work related stress. These challenges include but are not limited to:

- Intense work environments
- Long shifts and long hours
- Difficult patients/Difficult family members
- High stress environments
- Verbal Abuse/Physical Assault
- Exposure to suffering and loss

Signs of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Even if we are managing our work and personal stress well, we are likely to experience some symptoms of compassion fatigue. Some of the signs are listed below:

- Distancing/Numbness
- Hopelessness/Helplessness
- Diminished Capacity for Enjoyment
- Negative Self-Image

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- Cynicism/Reduced Empathy
- Poor Self-Care
- Depleted Energy/Fatigue
- Compromised Immune System
- Somatic Concerns headaches, backaches, pain,
- Poor Work Performance (absenteeism/lateness, carelessness, tasks left undone)
- Poor Patient Care
- Risk Taking Behaviors
- Substance Abuse/Addictive Behaviors
- Irritability/Resentment/Anger/Avoidance

Aside from the negative consequences of burnout and compassion fatigue on our work performance, many healthcare professionals end up leaving healthcare prematurely—a loss to the healthcare community not to mention a personal loss of investment in time, training, and of a potentially rewarding career in healthcare. In addition, many people believe that once they experience burnout that they cannot reverse the process. Actually, it is natural to experience or exhibit these symptoms or behaviors occasionally to some degree, even daily.

Develop a Personalized Warning System

We can determine when we are moving into a danger zone of Compassion Fatigue by developing a personalized warning system which lets us know when we are dangerously high on key symptoms or behaviors and, as a result, need to implement strategies for taking care of ourselves and managing our stress. We can look through the list and see which signs we are particularly vulnerable to and regularly checking in with what level we are experiencing the symptom or behavior on a scale of 1-10.

Tools like the *Professional Quality of Life Scale* can give an objective measure of the level of our Compassion Fatigue and Burnout as well as feedback on our level of Compassion Satisfaction--how much we are enjoying and finding reward in our work.

Preventing Compassion Fatigue and Increasing Compassion Satisfaction

When we are showing signs of increased burnout and compassion fatigue, how do we renew our passion for our work? We develop a tool kit of interventions that build our resilience and ability to cope and even excel in the face of the intense stressful but rewarding work that we do.

The Compassion Satisfaction Resilience Tool Kit

1. Develop/Activate Social Support
2. Physical Health/Self-Care/Self-Awareness
3. Increase Positive Experiences and Positive Emotions
4. Positivity/Attend to the Good
5. Cultivate Optimism

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6. Identify and Develop Our Strengths
7. Express the Stress
8. Access Meaning and Purpose/Spirituality
9. Attend Continuing Education and Training

1) Develop/Activate social support

Especially important in healthcare that we get support from people who can handle what we are sharing—may not be family members but people in the field who understand. Important to have someone we trust on each shift, someone who has our back. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person's resilience.

2) Physical Health/Self-Care/Self-Awareness

Self-care includes sleep, rest, eating well, drinking water. Sleep is our primary source of restoration and healing. Eating well is also critical—both for nourishment and to eliminate toxins. Exercise does the same and, in addition to literally making us stronger, it can help us sleep better. Self-care also includes self-awareness, attuning to our physical and emotional state, without judgment.

Build in mini breaks both at work and at home, even if only for a moment or two. Take just a moment or two throughout the day and in the evening—a mini break.

Review your workload at the beginning of the day and balance your tasks (even if there are crises so that you are able to step away and do something different. Do not wait until you are done with everything! Reduce the intensity of your activity several times throughout the day so that you are not “on” the long stretches without some sort of psychological and physical break.

We cultivate awareness of ourselves, others, and our environment. This practice is often called “Mindfulness” and involves developing awareness without judgment. Even though we are often working in fast-paced, chaotic environments where we are required to be alert, vigilant, and to think and act decisively and quickly—it helps to regularly pause for a moment and check-in with ourselves. Practicing mindfulness helps induce the Relaxation Response—in which we train our amygdala, the part of the brain that process and expresses strong emotion especially anger and fear, to modulate our emotional responses so that we are not in a fight and flight mode. It allows us to control our responses so that we are not just impulsively reacting but proactively responding.

Pause, notice without judgment, take stock of ourselves. Notice what we are experiencing physically, emotionally (what feelings, if any, we are having), and what we are focusing on either in our immediate environment or in our thoughts. We notice where we are and our surroundings, who is with us, what is happening around us. We also recognize when we need to eat, rest, stretch, connect to someone else, be alone, etc.... We check in to see if we are experiencing an increase in the signs or symptoms of stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue.

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3) Increase Positive Experiences and Positive Emotions

Most of us do not think of work as an experience which should be enjoyable and yet that is exactly what we want to create—a more enjoyable work life. Not only does it make the experience more pleasant, but increased positivity in the workplace improves our satisfaction with our work, gives us more energy and vitality, and helps make our work-life more sustainable and meaningful. In addition, we recover from stress and heal more quickly. At work, we want to have a ratio of at least 5 positive exchanges/experiences to 1 difficult or challenging experience. Although that can seem like a daunting task in healthcare environment, these positivity experiences can be quite simple and brief.

- Notice small blessings and things that are working in your environment
- Take a moment to do something that brings a smile to someone else (co-worker, patient, family member, or the cafeteria server, etc.)
- Do things you enjoy (at work and at home--have fun, be playful)
- Share with your team positive experiences at work:
 - Someone did something nice for you or was kind to you
 - You did something nice for someone else and felt good about it
 - You felt really good or proud about your work or the work of your team

4) Positivity/Attend to the Good

Most of us would like to be more positive in general, but don't know how to shift gears when we're tired, irritable, overworked and overwhelmed. In addition, we are biologically wired to be alert to indicators that something bad is happening and to narrow our focus to those variables in order to effectively manage whatever the crisis might be. Nevertheless, in reality, the field of human experience is mostly positive—we can walk, talk, eat, sleep, get to work; however, we tend not to notice this general field of positivity.

Although some of us may be more naturally inclined to be appreciative and more positive, others of us have to engage in conscious strategies for attending to the good in life. The strategies we listed above for increasing our positive experiences help us not only feel better but also broaden our perceptions and open up possibilities so that we are optimistic and receptive to new ideas and change. In other words, when we feel “good”, we think “good”! We can also deliberately identify what is working and functional—in our workplace, on our teams, with our co-workers and bosses, in our relationships and in our personal lives.

An old fable illustrates this principle well.

One evening, an old Cherokee tells his grandson:

“Inside all people, a battle goes on between two wolves. One wolf is negativity: anger, sadness, contempt, fear, guilt, shame, and hate. The other is positivity: joy, gratitude, serenity, hope, pride, amusement, and above all, love.

The grandson thinks about this for a minute, then asks his grandfather:

“Well, which wolf wins?”

The grandfather replies, “The one you feed.”

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5) Identify and Develop Our Strengths

Another strategy for attending to the good involves focusing on our strengths and the strengths of those around us. When we appreciate what assets and attributes we and others uniquely contribute to the important work we are collectively doing, we are more empowered and feel inherently more capable. We also have more faith in our peers and leaders and have more cooperative and effective teams.

- Identify 3-5 strengths that are essential to who you are as a person.
- Identify strengths you bring to your work.
- Identify the strengths that most energize you.
- Notice strengths of those around you.

6) Cultivate Optimism: Optimists “own” the good but not the bad, pessimists tend to do the opposite, they “own the bad” and not the good. Optimists believe that negative circumstances are temporary, they minimize failure and personalize success. Optimists are more likely to believe they can positively effect outcomes; whereas pessimists tend to doubt their capacity to impact their circumstance

We are usually disposed toward one or the other explanatory style. Neither is better—it is perhaps more important to consider whether your explanatory style—you way of explaining what is going on in and around you--is facilitating or getting in the way of what you are trying to accomplish.

If you find that your perceptions are interfering with your goals, cognitive strategies for transforming discouraging or unrealistic beliefs can be very effective. Cognitive behavioral therapists can help guide this process. Workbooks are also available that walk you through challenging negative assumptions and coming up with more empowering alternatives.

The serenity prayer, which acknowledges the powerlessness that we feel about things we cannot change but also helps us identify and channel our energy toward the factors that we can, is a useful motto for optimism:

***Grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can and
Wisdom to know the difference.***

Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr 1943

7) Express the Stress Share about the stressors in your life through journaling, creative writing, artwork, and supportive conversations. Develop peer support groups so that you have opportunities to share about the unique stressors that you are exposed to in your work.

Assess the level of stress that you are experiencing if you have been exposed to excessive suffering or loss. Trauma that we have exposed to first hand or Vicarious Traumatization, trauma that we experience as a result of supporting and caring for others who are experiencing trauma, responds well to processing through writing and openly discussing in appropriate support groups.

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8) Connect to Purpose and Meaning.

Connecting to our reasons for doing our work and the values that drive that passion can help us manage that intensity. In particular, finding positive meaning, also called benefit-finding, helps people bounce back quicker from hardship. This may involve looking at the strengths, support, and resilience that we have encountered in ourselves and in others in the face of adversity.

Identifying what core values we hold and a personal mission can also help us maintain focus when we become overwhelmed by the adversity that we experience ourselves and that we witness others experience. It can be a larger vision “I want to soften suffering and give people hope” to a smaller mission for the day “Today I will make three people smile”. Along those lines, it can be very helpful to identify what we would like to accomplish personally and professionally in the bigger picture, in the next 5-10 years, and over the next year and align those aspirations with our spiritual values.

9) Attend Continuing Education and Training Events

Professional competence helps us feel empowered to cope with the professional challenges they encounter. It renews our vigor for our work and broadens our repertoire of tools for addressing problems. Ask to get more training! Or offer training yourself and share your unique skills and expertise.

And we remember the unique values and strengths that bring us to this work!

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Resources: (go to www.creativewellbeingworkshops.com to explore more resources)

- American Institute of Stress, <http://www.stress.org/military/for-practitionersleaders/compassion-fatigue>
- Compassion Fatigue Solutions www.compassionfatigue.ca
- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project <http://www.compassionfatigue.org>
- Positivity <http://www.positivityratio.com>
- Professional Quality of Life Scale, http://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html
- Professional Renewal Center, www.prckansas.org
- Therapist’s Guide to Self-Care. Lillie Weiss
- Creative Wellbeing Workshops www.creativewellbeingworkshops.com

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