Compassion Fatigue

Definition (according to the World English Dictionary): fatigue, emotional distress or apathy resulting from the constant demands of caring for others. The inability to react sympathetically to a crisis or disaster, etc., because of overexposure to previous crises, disasters, etc.

All of us have occasional days when our motivation and energy levels vary. This fluctuation in energy is normal.

Compassion fatigue typically develops over time. It can mimic depression and once a person is “burned out,” dramatic changes are required to reverse the process. Prevention is key. Reducing stress and caring for yourself helps to avoid compassion fatigue.

Watch for these signs that you may be moving toward compassion fatigue, otherwise called caregiver burnout:*

- Emotional exhaustion — feeling drained, not having anything to give even before the day begins
- Depersonalization — feeling disconnected from other people, feeling resentful, and seeing them negatively
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment — feeling ineffective; the results achieved are not meaningful

* Shared from the writings of Alan Wolfelt, PhD, founder of Center for Life Loss and Transition

Burnout

Burnout occurs when the person suffering compassion fatigue comes to a point that they no longer are able to care with compassion. The following are symptoms you may notice in yourself, or that a friend or family member may notice in you:

- A sense of ongoing and constant fatigue
- Decreasing interest in work
- Decrease in work production
- Withdrawal from social contacts
- Increase in use of stimulants and alcohol
- Increasing fear of death
- Change in eating patterns
- Feelings of helplessness

When to ask for help

If you feel you may be suffering compassion fatigue, talk with your doctor, nurse or pastoral care provider. Ask for assistance to find a counselor to help you at this time. Many caregivers seek professional help through this time. Helping yourself is not a sign of weakness; strong people take care of themselves.
Caring for the Caregiver

When on an airplane the flight attendant will instruct parents to put their mask on before putting their child’s mask on. Why? The reason is, if you don’t take care of yourself, you will not be able to take care of your child. As a caregiver this rings true for you and the one you are caring for.

Here are some tips to help.

1. Provide quiet time for yourself every day.
2. Laugh at yourself.
3. Talk nicely to yourself.
4. Give yourself a present.
5. Say “no” and feel ok about it.
6. Get at least seven hours of sleep each night.
7. Share your thoughts with a trusted friend.
8. Accept yourself.
9. Try something creative.
10. Eat healthy — so you can have that piece of chocolate.
11. Take time for a physical activity that you enjoy.
12. Know your signs of building stress and intervene early.

“It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no person can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson
**Stress Reducers from the writings of Alan Wolfelt, PhD**

The suggestions below are shared from the writings of Alan Wolfelt, PhD, grief psychologist, founder of Center for Loss & Life Transition.

**Escape for a while**

Spend at least 15 minutes alone daily. Take a walk, sit in silence or with soft music playing, meditate, pray. Be sure there is no possibility of telephone calls or other interruptions.

Occasionally get a more substantial break from the daily routine with a weekend away or vacation — a change of activity, scenery, or people.

**Establish priorities in your life, both short and long term**

Short-term — Look at how your hectic routine now rules your life. Decide to take one thing at a time, starting with the most urgent. Forget about the other tasks until you get to them.

Long-term — Ask yourself what is really important to you. Decide, if you can, what you want to accomplish with your living. Plan ahead.

**Cultivate closeness with the people around you**

To have a friend, be a friend. Avoid the two biggest barriers to closeness by:

a. Sharing how you really feel. Use “I” statements (I feel sad, I feel angry, I was upset).

b. Really listening to others “I” statements. Pay close attention, make eye contact and don’t interrupt. Analyze what’s going on below the surface with an empathetic heart.

**Go easy with criticism, both of yourself and others**

Don’t expect too much. Don’t try to fit other people into a preconceived pattern. Put honest effort into the things you do, do the best you can and be tolerant of your own shortcomings. Forgive yourself and others.

**Talk out/work off your anger**

Talk it out with a level-headed person you trust. The talking-out process has enormous value.

Or, work off your pent-up energy by cleaning house, working at a hobby, taking a long walk, doing something physically active. It takes a calm head to handle a problem properly.

Reserve time to communicate, once a week, face to face, with someone you love. Talk about the affairs of your lives when/where there will be no interruptions by children or telephones. Tell each other what is bothering both of you at work, home or in terms of family and friends. Confide your worries, and share your joys. Make plans and decisions.

**Give in occasionally**

Giving in once in a while, even if you’re right, is easier on your system. When you give in, often others will too.

**Do something for yourself**

Doing something for yourself is OK. You need to be content in order to help others.

**Treasure your sense of humor**

Have the ability to laugh at yourself as well as at someone else’s joke.