

Compassion Fatigue – The Last Straw for Caregivers?
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What's going on in your caregiver life? Do you experience compassion satisfaction? Do you have some signs of burn out? Are you at risk for compassion fatigue? Is there a pervasive feeling of any one of these states in your life? Is there a way to tune in to You and get a sense of it – to become aware and act before the price is paid in dissatisfaction, unhappy clashes, life detours?

By now, many family and professional caregivers are familiar with the term Compassion Fatigue. Although many of us believe that much of our personal and professional discontent comes from compassion fatigue, in fact, there also can be other causes. Here are some things we can be aware of as we assess what's going on in our own caregiving lives and our caregiving teams.

First, let's describe compassion fatigue. Although it has become a widely used term applied to everything from hopelessness to PTSD, compassion fatigue generally describes a state experienced by those who help other people or creatures who are in distress. It has been described as deep physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion, or as a loss of sympathy for the suffering of others due to the high demands of the caregiving role. Another term for compassion fatigue is secondary trauma – simply, secondary or second-hand exposure to stressful events. It seems clear that caregivers are not only at risk for secondary trauma, but also primary trauma. We're exposed indirectly and directly to intense traumas daily. There may be many such traumatic events, one after another; with compassion fatigue there are distinct events with beginnings and endings. Burnout is different.

What is burnout, anyway? When we get close to burnout, we gradually feel more and more hopeless. Sometimes, the caregiving environment itself is the cause. Often it comes as a result of feeling a lack of success or meaning – feeling that we're not making a difference. There can be an overload of work, or a lack of support that creates this gradual shift. Often, there's a mismatch in values or rules with our care recipient or those on the caregiving team. Sometimes growing personal or family responsibilities added to work challenges create that gradual move to burnout. And sometimes, what appears to be something quite insignificant can be the tipping point – the last straw.

As we examine all the causes for these feelings, whether they're labeled compassion fatigue, burnout, dissatisfaction, or outright anger, there is an underlying theme among them all. In every case, there is loss – often many losses. And in every case there is grief over those losses. When we tune in to the fact that there is grieving involved, we have another hopeful perspective from which to act.

We do have a choice here. Once we're aware of what's really going on, there is the amazing opportunity to create a positive, successful outcome for ourselves as the caregiver and for other individuals of the care team (and that includes the care recipient). When we are conscious of the often hidden yet quite intense feelings of grief and loss, there is a chance to truly make a change.

So, what are some of the causes of this sense of loss? Some are so obvious that most of us can tune in with no trouble. We can all recount scenarios or situations where the primary trauma was a cause of loss. There is the near loss of the care recipient during emergency episodes. There are end-of-life dramas experienced directly. There can be differing beliefs and values of caregivers, care recipients and among those on the care team. These differences can create conflicting rules for these times. We also experience secondary traumas – the high demands of care recipients who seem inconsolable and who often require immediate and intense attention. There are other family members who require attention. There often are children whose parents cannot find the personal resources to help at the time of this loss. There are complicated issues of multiple losses of family members and even beloved pets. And who handles all this? The caregiver does. And too often the caregiver is drawing from a vacuum.

And there are other life transitions going on all the time that can create a growing sense of loss for many. There are losses of parents, losses of pets, losses of jobs or relationships, children leaving home – or children coming back home – that seem to be just expected life changes. But they can be life challenges that enter the lives of the caregiver and the team and that create issues there for all. Members leaving the care team can cause a huge sense of loss among those who remain. Even adding a new team member changes the team dynamic enough that there can be a perceived loss, even in the presence of the excitement and elation that seems to be the emotion of the day. In each case, there can be a sense of loss of 'what was' and sadness or uncertainty about what will be.

The very good news here is that people who are called to the role of caregiver, whether for family or as a professional, generally are caring and giving individuals. For many, all it takes is to make the life changes and losses visible – to become aware of these transitions. Once aware, we can create an environment of safety, caring and companionship that allows for these changes and is accepting of the shared mourning that will help get us and our teammates through. And what options and choices do we have to create a supporting environment for these changes, transitions and losses?

For a professional caregiver, leadership both from the top and from the ranks is crucial. Leaders must realize that these losses are inevitable and the many and varied reactions to them are normal. To offer a place where open mourning is allowed and even encouraged is healthy. Instead of a “stuff it” internal expression of grief, staff members who mourn their losses through outward expression will ultimately come through the other side of the pain they feel. A workplace that honors and acknowledges these times will have a team that is closer and more respectful of themselves, and their clients and patients. For family caregivers, finding a supportive team to help with both the physical work and with the emotional work is crucial.

Fortunately, there is a box of tools that is made just for times like these. It does require some awareness to know what tool to use and when to use it. Learning to ‘read’ others’ body language, to understand key words or clues, and to really listen are wonderful tools that will help to develop that awareness. Creating an environment where it is safe to share your Truth or ask for help is critical. Learning that we all have rule books for living and that they all differ is helpful in dropping judgment and adopting acceptance. Knowing what to say in times of loss helps the transition for both the bereaved and their friends and colleagues. Creating memorials is a helpful tool for staff and for clients. But these tools are only useful if there is acceptance of loss, and an understanding that there’s no way around the pain. We must go through it with helpful, nonjudgmental colleagues and friends as companions.

The bonus is that learning to support and companion each other gives us valuable skills and tools to use with clients. As we companion our care team, we learn through experience that there are phases of grief. What’s important to know is that these do not present themselves in any order, or with certain finality. Some may be skipped entirely, and sometimes they’re experienced at the same time. Each of us is different in our grief process. We cannot expect to see Kubler-Ross’ stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in some linear order. Each of us will process in a timeframe that is different from others. Learning to honor and accept the manner in which each team member processes grief translates as a true gift when we are called upon to companion our family, our friends and our clients in their times of loss.

Companionship those who grieve is an important skill to be applied in every walk of life. When the tools of companionship are honored and practiced in the care team, a culture of respect and caring continues to grow. When companionship is consciously chosen as a core value, the awareness and acceptance of others’ rules and way of living becomes a natural and comfortable way of being.