

Coping with compassion fatigue

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Healthcare professionals treating patients who have experienced trauma put their own health and well-being at risk, says Charles Figley, director of the Tulane University Traumatology Institute. (Photo from Thinkstock)

Compassion — concern for the suffering of others — is unquestionably a valued quality for healthcare professionals. However, the stress of providing daily care to patients who have experienced trauma could greatly impact the personal health and well-being of caregivers through a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue.

“Compassion fatigue is the manifestation of succumbing to the demands of client care over self-care,” says Charles Figley, director of the [Tulane University Traumatology Institute](#).

[Figley](#) has authored multiple works about it, including the book *Compassion Fatigue: Coping With Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder In Those Who Treat The Traumatized*.

"It's like secondhand smoke in some ways," says Figley, explaining how the stress disorder can take a toll on caregivers over time.

"It's the natural consequent behaviors ... resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a person. It leads to the practitioner putting more pressure on themselves," he says.

The most detrimental symptom faced by those experiencing compassion fatigue is loss of sleep, says Figley.

"Sleep is a good metric of general health, and [sufferers of compassion fatigue] can have difficulty going to sleep thinking of clients or even dreaming about them," says Figley.

A major hurdle that healthcare professionals face when dealing with secondary trauma is not recognizing the problem and staying silent instead of seeking help.

"People tend to keep it to themselves. They're afraid that people will ask, 'Why are you even in this field?' Consider the signs, and take notice: Are you working at home? Are you not getting enough sleep? Are you skipping lunch?" says Figley.

"Use it as a wake-up call, and stick to a self-care plan," says Figley.

Self-care tactics for combating compassion fatigue include incorporating healthy eating habits, exercising regularly and participating in calming activities like meditation and yoga.

"It's treatable. It's not some flaw," says Figley.

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