

Compassion / Enthusiasm Fatigue

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Introduction

Compassion fatigue is a serious condition that results when caregivers absorb the trauma from their patients. People suffering from Compassion Fatigue are in a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion. They feel depressed, depleted, tired, hopeless, and cynical about themselves, their work, their life, and the world. Sufferers of Compassion Fatigue care too much about the people or animals they take care of and care too little about themselves (Ochberg 2001).

Animal caregivers often have severe cases of Compassion Fatigue. People who care for animals see animals in pain, animals with no hope for a happy home, and animals who must be euthanized.

Who can suffer from Compassion Fatigue?

Emergency caregivers, counselors, mental health professionals, nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers, clergy, and animal caregivers

Animal caregivers versus human caregivers

Animal caregivers may suffer from worse Compassion Fatigue than human caregivers do for a variety of reasons:

- Humans can tell their caregivers what pain they are in, and animals cannot
- Animal caregivers have the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of the animals – this creates a burden so strong that the caregivers “begin to suffer pain the animals may or may not be suffering” (Roop and Vitelli 2003)
- Animal caregivers start to care more for the animals than for themselves – then can’t prioritize everyday occurrences, can’t take care of themselves, can’t let go of work even when not at work (Roop and Vitelli 2003)
- Animal caregivers have the ability to perform euthanasia – “Caring – Killing Paradox” (Roop and Vitelli 2003)

Compassion Fatigue versus anxiety, stress and burnout

Anxiety is uneasiness or dread about a future event, stress is a physical condition based on a perceived threat of danger, and burnout is exhaustion resulting from too much pressure and not enough satisfaction. Of the three, burnout is most similar to compassion fatigue. However, they are very different. Burnout is associated with hassles and stress of work. Burnout is cumulative and relatively predictable, and vacation or changing jobs often solves the problem. On the other hand, compassion fatigue is a state of tension and exhaustion resulting from trauma absorbed from the people or animals you are caring for (What is CF 2003).

Costs Of Compassion Fatigue

In addition to causing suffering of the person who has Compassion Fatigue, this condition can affect the person’s work and home.

- declining job performance
- low morale
- deteriorating personal relationships and home life
- decline in health
- substance abuse
- sleep disorders
- “Anxiety Generator” – coworkers anxiety builds off each other (Roop and Vitelli 2003)

Preventing Compassion Fatigue

(Compassion Fatigue 2003):

- let go of idealism
- schedule time off and adhere to that commitment
- renounce perfectionism
- join or start a peer support group
- examine your motivations
- attend to your spiritual and creative life
- eat well, exercise, and get sufficient sleep
- spend time in nature
- get help from someone who knows more than you do

Treating Compassion Fatigue

(from Roop and Vitelli 2003)

When a person realizes he or she has Compassion Fatigue, it is important for him or her to get professional help. In addition, it’s helpful to:

- Be aware of your own feelings
- Take care of yourself
- Remind yourself of your successes
- Re-evaluate your goals and expectations
- Remind yourself of the reason you chose this career
- Separate your home and work life
- Exercise
- Spend time with supportive people
- Vary and expand what you do

What employers can do

(Roop and Vitelli 2003)

Employers can and should do all they can to prevent and treat the Compassion Fatigue in their employees. Employers can:

- Offer programs for self-awareness and self-help
- Create varied work schedules and job duties (time off from stressful duties)
- Offer stress management and employee assistance programs
- Offer sabbaticals

References

- Compassion Fatigue: Another Form of Heart Disease.* (2003). Arizona Center for Social Trauma. www.ccstrauma.com/compassion.htm. Date accessed: 6/19/2003
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- Roop, R. and Vitelli, D. (2003). *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal Care Field.* The Humane Society of the United States. Volume 21. New Port, RI. 146-147.
- What is Compassion Fatigue?* (2003). America’s Continuing Education Network. <http://www.ace-network.com/cfspotlight.htm>. Date accessed: 8/9/2005

Compassion Satisfaction/Fatigue self-test: animal care

Adapted with permission from Figley, C.R., (1995). *Compassion Fatigue*, New York: Brunner/Mazel. © B. Hudnall Stamm, Traumatic Stress Research Group, 1995 -1998 <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~bhstamm/index.htm>.

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Helping people and animals puts you in direct contact with their lives. As you probably have experienced, your compassion for both of these groups has positive and negative aspects. This self-test helps you estimate your compassion status: How much at risk you are of burnout and compassion fatigue and also the degree of satisfaction with your helping others. Consider each of the following characteristics about you and your current situation. Using a pen or pencil, write in the number that honestly reflects how frequently you experienced these characteristics in the last week. Then follow the scoring directions at the end of the self-test.

- ___ 1. I am happy.
- ___ 2. I find my life satisfying.
- ___ 3. I have beliefs that sustain me.
- ___ 4. I feel estranged from others.
- ___ 5. I find that I learn new things from those I care for.
- ___ 6. I force myself to avoid certain thoughts or feelings that remind me of a frightening experience.
- ___ 7. I find myself avoiding certain activities or situations because they remind me of a frightening experience.
- ___ 8. I have gaps in my memory about frightening events.
- ___ 9. I feel connected to others.
- ___ 10. I feel calm.
- ___ 11. I believe that I have a good balance between my work and my free time.
- ___ 12. I have difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- ___ 13. I have outburst of anger or irritability with little provocation.
- ___ 14. I am the person I always wanted to be.
- ___ 15. I startle easily.
- ___ 16. While working with a person/animal, I've thought about violence against the perpetrator.
- ___ 17. I am a sensitive person.
- ___ 18. I have flashbacks connected to those I helped (people/animals).
- ___ 19. I have good peer support when I need to work through a highly stressful experience.
- ___ 20. I have had first-hand experience with traumatic events in my adult life.
- ___ 21. I have had first-hand experience with traumatic events in my childhood.
- ___ 22. I think that I need to "work through" a traumatic experience in my life.
- ___ 23. I think that I need more close friends.
- ___ 24. I think that there is no one to talk with about highly stressful experiences.
- ___ 25. I have concluded that I work too hard for my own good.
- ___ 26. Working with those I help brings me a great deal of satisfaction.
- ___ 27. I feel invigorated after working with those I help.
- ___ 28. I am frightened of things a person/animal I helped has said or done to me.
- ___ 29. I experience troubling dreams of the animals/people that I help.
- ___ 30. I have happy thoughts about those (animals & owners) I help and how I could help them.
- ___ 31. I have experienced intrusive thoughts of times with especially difficult animals/people I helped.
- ___ 32. I have suddenly and involuntarily recalled a frightening experience while working with a person/animal I've helped.
- ___ 33. I am pre-occupied with more than one animal/person I help.
- ___ 34. I am losing sleep over the traumatic experience of animals/people I help.
- ___ 35. I have joyful feelings about how I can help the animals/people I work with.
- ___ 36. I think that I might have been "infected" by the traumatic stress of those I help.
- ___ 37. I think that I might be positively "inoculated" by the traumatic stress of those I help.
- ___ 38. I remind myself to be less concerned about the well being of those I help.
- ___ 39. I have felt trapped by my work as a helper.
- ___ 40. I have a sense of hopelessness associated with working with those I help.
- ___ 41. I have felt "on edge" about various things and I attribute this to working with certain animals/people I help.
- ___ 42. I wish that I could avoid working with some animals/people I help.
- ___ 43. Some animals/people I help are particularly enjoyable to work with.
- ___ 44. I have been in danger working with animals/people I help.
- ___ 45. I feel that some animals/owners I help dislike me personally.

Items about being a helper and your helping environment

- ___ 46. I like my work as a helper.
- ___ 47. I feel like I have the tools and resources that I need to do my work as a helper.
- ___ 48. I have felt weak, tired, run down as a result of my work as helper.
- ___ 49. I have felt depressed as a result of my work as a helper.
- ___ 50. I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a helper.

- ___ 51. I am unsuccessful at separating helping from personal life.
- ___ 52. I enjoy my co-workers.
- ___ 53. I depend on my co-workers to help me when I need it.
- ___ 54. My co-workers can depend on me for help when they need it.
- ___ 55. I trust my co-workers.
- ___ 56. I feel little compassion toward most of my co-workers.
- ___ 57. I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with helping technology.
- ___ 58. I feel I am working more for the money/prestige than for personal fulfillment.
- ___ 59. Although I have to do paperwork that I don't like, I still have time to work with those I help.
- ___ 60. I find it difficult separating my personal life from my helper life.
- ___ 61. I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with helping techniques and protocols.
- ___ 62. I have a sense of worthlessness/disillusionment/resentment associated with my role as a helper.
- ___ 63. I have thoughts that I am a "failure" as a helper.
- ___ 64. I have thoughts that I am not succeeding at achieving my life goals.
- ___ 65. I have to deal with bureaucratic, unimportant tasks in my work as a helper.
- ___ 66. I plan to be a helper for a long time.

Scoring instructions

Please note that research is ongoing on this scale and the following scores should be used as a guide, not confirmatory information. Cut points are theoretically derived and should be used with caution and only for educational purposes.

1. Be certain you respond to all items.
2. Mark the items for scoring:
 - a. Circle the following 23 items: 4, 6-8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20-22, 28, 29, 31-34, 36, 38-40, 44.
 - b. Put a check by the following 16 items: 17, 23-25, 41, 42, 45, 48, 49, 51, 56, 58, 60, 62-65.
 - c. Put an x by the following 26 items: 1-3, 5, 9-11, 14, 19, 26-27, 30, 35, 37, 43, 46-47, 50, 52-55, 57, 59, 61, 66.
3. Add the numbers you wrote next to the items for each set of items and note:
 - a. Your potential for Compassion Satisfaction (x): 118 and above=extremely high potential; 100-117=high potential; 82-99=good potential; 64-81=modest potential; below 63=low potential.
Your score _____
 - b. Your risk for Burnout (check): 36 or less=extremely low risk; 37-50=moderate risk; 51-75=high risk; 76-85=extremely high risk.
Your score: _____
 - c. Your risk for Compassion Fatigue (circle): 26 or less=extremely low risk, 27-30=low risk; 31-35=moderate risk; 36-40=high risk; 41 or more=extremely high risk.
Your score: _____