

CARING FOR OURSELVES

Signs, Symptoms & Strategies for Loved Ones Experiencing Compassion Fatigue

What is compassion fatigue, and why does it matter?

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, refers to the **physical, emotional, and psychological impact of caring for others.**

First – and most importantly – experiencing emotional, cognitive, and/or physiological responses as a caregiver is *completely normal*. **No matter our fortitude, we're not immune to the effects of holding others' pain and suffering.** This is particularly true when the person you're caring for is a close friend or family member.

It's common for caregivers to sideline their own needs for so long that they may begin to struggle with their own mental health. It can also be difficult to acknowledge the personal impact that being a caregiver has on you when you are prioritizing being strong and “holding it together” for your loved ones. Unfortunately, this can eventually lead to distancing yourself from your loved ones or even experiencing feelings like helplessness, uncertainty, or irritability when you are with them.

This is not a sign that you do not care about or can no longer support them meaningfully. It's your body and mind telling you that it's time to start tending to yourself as well.

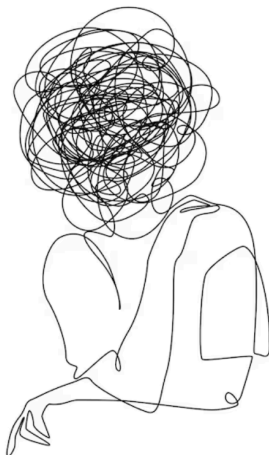
Rather than try to avoid or push down the natural feelings that come up for you, **maintaining awareness, employing science-backed strategies, and knowing when to seek support** are critical to being able to show up for yourself and your loved ones.

What are some signs of compassion fatigue?



PHYSICAL

Headaches
Difficulty sleeping
Muscle tension
Recurring illnesses (eg, coughs or colds)



EMOTIONAL

Drastic shifts in mood, or “mood swings”
Pessimism, or cynicism
Irritability, or a “short fuse”
Sadness & apathy
Feeling overwhelmed & helpless
Anxiety

COGNITIVE

Difficulty concentrating
Difficulty being productive
Recurring nightmares
Shifts in your thinking (eg, “The world is a hopeless place”)



BEHAVIORAL

“Self-medicating” (eg, drinking or eating more than you’d like)
Isolation from people
Avoiding activities you typically enjoy

What can I do to take care of myself?

Pay attention to your own stress levels & responses

The most important thing you can do for yourself is start to build awareness and acknowledge what you are experiencing, instead of pushing away or avoiding these thoughts and feelings.

- Check in with yourself regularly across areas in your life (eg, work, relationships, family, health). Are you showing up the way you want to? What areas have fallen to the wayside?
- Allow yourself to truly feel what comes up, *without judgment*. (Mindfulness exercises can be helpful for this.) Remember, strong emotions can feel terrible, but no feeling can last forever.

Ask for help & support

*Be sure to reach out to the right people for different needs.
No one person can provide every kind of support.*

- Stay in regular contact with family and friends, even if it's not to talk about anything related to your work.
- Follow the advice you'd give others in a similar situation. Treat yourself with the same compassion and understanding.
- Seek out resources and support from others in the caregiving community.
- Seek out professional mental health support when needed (*more on this below*).

Tend to your physical & mental health

Our physical health has a profound impact on our mental health, improving mood and sleep quality, among others. Strengthening this foundation helps protect us from the impact of stress.

- Regularly get enough hours of *restful* sleep. 10 hours of anxiety-filled sleep is not the same as 7.5 hours of well-rested sleep.
- Eat healthy foods, and stay physically active.
- Try out different tools for stress management and processing, like mindfulness exercises, breathing techniques, and journaling.
- Spend time doing things that are aligned with what matters most to you, *even when* it feels exhausting or impossible to make time for.
- Rely on your tried-and-true coping strategies. You know best what works for you and makes you feel good in mind and body.

Take breaks that actually recharge your battery

Taking a break when needed is not “giving up.” In fact, taking the time to truly recharge allows you to better show up in your everyday life.

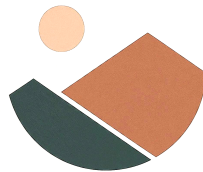
- Know what your boundaries are, and respect them. For example, if your social media accounts are pushing content that worsens your symptoms, block and/or change settings.
- Take breaks from specific aspects of caregiving that are particularly challenging, or rotate with others in your community. If you’re showing up feeling burnt out, exhausted, or overwhelmed, it can often be best to sit this one out.
- Get the *right kinds* of rest. Do things you enjoy, things that recharge your battery even if they involve more time, effort, or “work.”

When should I seek additional support?

Sometimes these tools and strategies are simply not enough, and we find ourselves needing additional support. Signs that you may benefit from additional support include recurring upsetting thoughts or memories, strong and ongoing feelings of anxiety or sadness, irritability or anger that is interfering with your relationships or other areas of life, persistent difficulty sleeping, nightmares, or reliance on unhelpful behaviors to cope.

Finding a therapist with experience treating compassion fatigue can be helpful for working through a challenging time, recharging, and reconnecting with your loved ones.

Center for
Values-Based Living



If you're interested in learning more, or you're ready to address compassion fatigue, reach out to CVB Living: [\(720\) 204-8783](tel:(720)204-8783) or alisha.desai@cvbliving.com.