

# CARING FOR OURSELVES

## Signs, Symptoms & Strategies for Professionals 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 in this line of work is *completely normal*. **No matter our fortitude, we're not immune to the effects of holding others' pain and suffering.**

**It's common for professionals in caregiving roles to sideline their own needs for so long that they eventually experience burnout and may struggle with their own mental health.** Going an entire day without eating and ending the workday with a blank mind are all-too-familiar experiences.

Unfortunately, in these professional settings, unrealistic demands and expectations can be normalized as “part of the job.” This standard can make it particularly difficult to acknowledge the personal impact of this work, and **it can become routine to minimize your own challenges when you bear witness to so much suffering.**

This can eventually lead to feelings like helplessness, uncertainty, or irritability. **This is not a sign that you “can't handle it.”** It's your body and mind telling you that it's time to start tending to yourself.

Rather than try to suppress 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, your work, 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 your professional 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.*

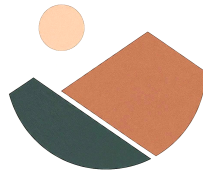
- Know what your boundaries are, and respect them. For example, if your social media accounts are pushing content that worsens your symptoms, block and/or change settings.
- Get the *right kinds* of rest. Do things you enjoy, things that recharge your battery even if they involve more time, effort, or “work” upfront.
- If possible, take breaks from specific aspects of work that are particularly challenging, or redirect some work time to projects you’re passionate about.

## 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:7202048783) or [alisha.desai@cvbliving.com](mailto:alisha.desai@cvbliving.com).