

Caring until it hurts

Our counselors sometimes encounter a syndrome called “compassion fatigue.” This is a type of stress that can affect anyone who is continually exposed to the pain and trauma of others. It’s often called “the cost of caring.”

Psychologist Dr. Charles Figley has studied this type of stress and says, “It is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.”

This can often affect people who have a highly empathetic nature. They often identify with and take on the suffering of others until the burden is too great and they become desensitized. They may develop apathy, sadness, or even experience nightmares and flashbacks. To cope with the intensity of the feelings, sufferers may adopt self-destructive coping mechanisms, such as unhealthy eating or drinking, drug use, risk taking, cynicism, and intense anger.

It’s common in the traditional helping professions, such as healthcare, but it can affect others, too: attorneys who deal with problemed people; reporters who cover tragedies and wars; even family caregivers who provide care for a terminally ill or incapacitated family member.

While compassion fatigue is a specific syndrome, there are related forms of stress or burnout that anyone can experience. You might hear talk of “disaster fatigue” or “outrage fatigue,” for example. With 24/7 news coverage and social media, we are continually exposed to a steady stream of terrible news and the suffering of our fellow humans in the form of natural disasters, mass shootings, violence



and wars that result in refugee migration. Our natural sense of caring and compassion may kick into overdrive as we learn about and identify with the difficulty of victims. We may experience feelings of guilt that others are suffering while our own lives are going well, or a sense of helplessness that there is little we can do to offer relief or help resolve things.

Whether in our professional or our personal lives, how can we best cope with “too much caring”? Here are some of the ways that experts suggest.

Practice self-care. Keeping a healthy diet, exercise and sleep regime is vital to our mental health. It’s important to “put your own life jacket on first”.

Build your personal resilience. Take time every day to replenish. Meditate. Take a stress class or engage a stress coach.

Find support groups. There are many groups both online and off that deal with virtually any situation you may face that is provoking stress.

Prioritize and pace yourself. You can’t do it all, learn to do what you can.

Get professional help. Your EAP is available 24/7.