

Compassion Fatigue and the Health Service Professional

Working in the health service professions is a very rewarding vocation. Most people who work in these professions choose to do so because they enjoy working with people, taking care of their health needs and making a difference in their lives. However, the process of helping others can be stressful and sometimes very taxing on one's physical and emotional health. Our professional work can drain us of our energy and contribute to a host of physical and emotional problems, including the abuse of alcohol or drugs.

Dr. Angela Panos defined compassion fatigue as "symptoms experienced by caregivers who become so overwhelmed by the exposure to the feelings and experiences of their clients that they themselves experience feelings of fear, pain and suffering including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, loss of energy and hypervigilance. It can be cumulative (from the effects of helping many clients) or occur in response to a particularly challenging or traumatic individual case. This extreme state of anxiety and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped becomes traumatizing for the helper. "For this reason it is sometimes called 'vicarious traumatization' or 'secondary traumatization'," (Figley, C.R., 1995).

Compassion fatigue is an indicator that our lives are out of balance and changes need to be made to restore our physical and emotional health. It gives us an opportunity for self-assessment and growth towards a more balanced life. However, this only occurs if we recognize the problem and deal with it in a positive manner.

The symptoms of compassion fatigue are similar to those of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, only instead of the symptoms being based upon a trauma that you directly experienced, they are due to the trauma that your client(s) have experienced. Review the following symptoms of compassion fatigue to evaluate yourself:

- Sleep or appetite disturbances
- Unexplained physical pains
- Persistent frustration, anxiety or discouragement
- Consistently feeling emotionally and/or physically drained.
- Fatigue
- Decreased interest in family, recreational or spiritual activities
- Increased in time spent alone/withdrawal from others
- Loss of enthusiasm for work and dread of going to work
- Finding it difficult to separate your personal life from your work life
- Tardiness to work and need to leave work early
- Excessive use of sick time or vacation days
- Increased use of alcohol, prescription drugs or illegal drugs
- If in recovery, decline in interest in personal addiction recovery program
- If in recovery, relapse

If you recognize that you are suffering from compassion fatigue and/or are abusing alcohol or drugs, you will need to reestablish a healthy balance in your life. You can accomplish this by getting proper nutrition, regular exercise and necessary rest; prioritizing personal and professional needs; setting realistic expectations and goals; and affirming reasonable personal and work boundaries. If you are in a recovery program "dry spell", return to 12-Step recovery meetings and talking to your sponsor. If you have relapsed, schedule an appointment with the Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program (NE LAP) for immediate assistance with determining your treatment or recovery needs. There are many resources available to help you restore your health and happiness and ensure you can continue to compassionately care for others. "By meeting our own mental, physical and emotional needs, we give care from a place of abundance, not scarcity", Patricia Smith, founder of Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project.

If you are a licensed health service professional wanting more information about alcohol/drug abuse or addiction treatment or would like to schedule an educational presentation on alcohol/drug addiction and the health service professional, contact the NE LAP at (800) 851-2336 or (402) 8055 or visit our web site at www.lapne.org.