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Are You Suffering from Compassion Fatigue?

What to do when showing compassion feels like a burden

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Source:

Compassion fatigue used to be a problem that was most commonly seen among health care professionals. Because their work puts them in situations where they commonly see or hear about ongoing and sometimes unspeakable suffering, it is not unusual to see some of our most skilled, caring, and compassionate "helpers" fall victim to compassion fatigue. However, in today's world, where every tragedy is instantly broadcast live in living color directly into our living rooms (TV), laps (laptop), and/or hands (smartphone), compassion fatigue is no longer unique to certain professions. As Dr. Amit Sood points out in his book, *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living*, "... we are inundated with graphic images of the unimaginable suffering of millions. We can fathom the suffering of a few, but a million becomes a statistic that numbs us."

Signs of compassion fatigue include:

- Feeling burdened by the suffering of others
- Blaming others for their suffering
- Isolating yourself
- Loss of pleasure in life
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia
- Physical and mental fatigue
- Bottling up your emotions

- Increased nightmares
- Feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness
- Frequent complaining about your work or your life
- Overeating
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol
- Poor self-care
- Beginning to receive a lot of complaints about your work or attitude
- Denial

In fact, according to the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#), "denial is one of the most detrimental symptoms" because it prevents those who are experiencing compassion fatigue from accurately assessing how fatigued and stressed they actually are, which prevents them from seeking help.

To see where you fall on the compassion satisfaction/fatigue continuum, take the [Professional Quality of Life](#) (PROQOL) questionnaire, which was developed by Dr. Beth Hundall Stamm, one of the world's leading experts on compassion fatigue. In addition to English, the PROQOL has been translated into 17 different languages, all of which can be found [here](#). Although the measure was originally developed for professional "helpers," it can provide important feedback about compassion fatigue, burnout, and life stress for anyone who spends a good deal of time helping others.

If it turns out that you scored high on the compassion fatigue scale (or any of the others), there is hope. Like burnout or any other stress-related condition, compassion fatigue is not terminal, but it certainly can impact the quality of your life, and awareness is the first step to recovery. Dr. Stamm explains that through awareness and healthy self-care, those who experience compassion fatigue can start to understand the complexity of the emotions they've been "juggling and, most likely, suppressing." For those who find themselves in the throes of compassion fatigue, she recommends the following:

- Enhance your awareness with education
- Accept where you are on your path at all times
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you
- Clarify your personal boundaries—what works for you and what doesn't
- Be kind to yourself
- Express what you need verbally, and
- Take positive action to change your environment.

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If your compassion fatigue score is low or average, that's good news, but it's important to take measures to protect yourself. To help prevent compassion fatigue, Dr. Sood recommends:

- Limit the amount of daily news you watch or read about
- Try to come to terms with the fact that pain and suffering are realities of life over which we have little or no control
- Be grateful for what is good in your life and in the world
- Try to find some meaning in the suffering you see
- If you must blame something, blame the situation, not the person
- Show compassion to yourself by being kind, soothing, and comforting to

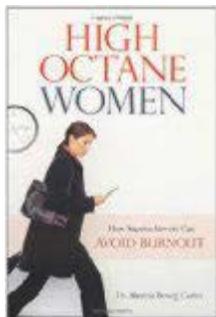
yourself

Citing research from the University of Michigan and the University of Rochester Medical Center that found that compared to the late 1970s, empathy among students has declined by more than 40 percent, Dr. Sood says that we live in a world that desperately needs more compassion. So, the last thing we need is for those who are most adept at giving and showing compassion to lose that gift to something completely avoidable. By being aware of the warning signs of compassion fatigue, you can prevent it and continue to do what you do best—change lives for the better with one act of kindness at a time.

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Source:

Sherrie Bourg Carter is the author of *High Octane Women: How Superachievers*

Can Avoid Burnout (Prometheus Books, 2011).



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About the Author



Sherrie Bourg Carter, Psy.D., psychologist and author of "High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout," specializes in the area of women and stress.



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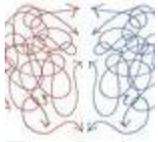
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