

# What to Do About Compassion Fatigue

It seems as though some are born to give more. And thank goodness for that. Otherwise, where would we find so many dedicated nurses, firefighters, social workers, and law enforcement officers?

Anyone who's ever done something to really make a difference in another person's life knows that there's no better feeling than helping someone who needs it. But caring also has a cost—particularly for those whose job it is to put others first.

## What is compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is a term that describes a gradual lessening of compassion over time in those who work with trauma victims. Emergency health care workers, mental health providers, caregivers, and first responders are particularly susceptible to this condition.

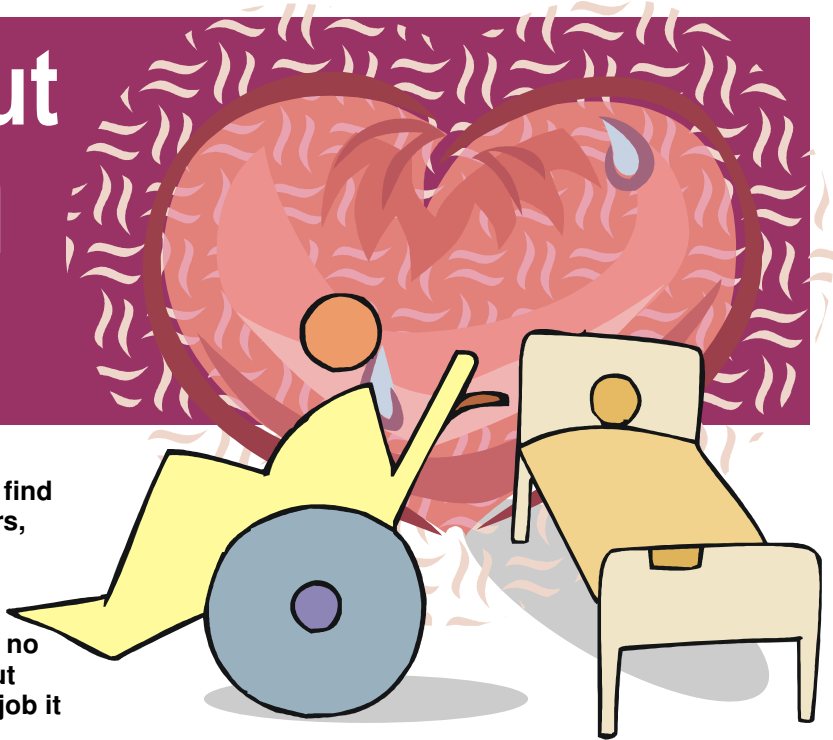
## Signs of compassion fatigue include:

- Flashbacks or nightmares about traumatic events you witnessed or heard about
- Feelings of cynicism and hopelessness about your job
- Overwhelming preoccupation with a particular individual or case
- Anger at how things are and your inability to change them
- Difficulty remembering things or performing every day tasks
- Mood swings
- Emotional withdrawal from relationships
- Physical ailments such as fatigue, headaches and troubles sleeping
- Mental ailments such as depression, anxiety, and feelings of guilt
- Work performance issues, a breakdown in work relationships, tardiness, and absenteeism

## What causes compassion fatigue?

The phrase “a heavy heart” is sometimes used to describe overwhelming sadness and emotional exhaustion. Though unscientific, it's an appropriate metaphor for what's happening to you when suffering from compassion fatigue.

Working with those who have been gravely harmed—either physically or emotionally—requires a tremendous amount of empathy. This “opening of the heart” leaves you vulnerable as you absorb the emotion, pain, and trauma of the people whom you're tasked with helping. Over time, the burden becomes overwhelming.



## How to overcome and recover from compassion fatigue

Although workers may strive to compartmentalize or “wall off” their emotions by separating their professional lives from their home lives, most find it to be impossible control the overlapping influence each area has on the other.

The keys to recovery are balance and rejuvenation. Here's what you can do to achieve this.

- Schedule a regular activity you enjoy that removes you from your daily stressors and allows you to mentally unwind.
- Find a daily outlet for your emotions, like writing down your feelings or talking to coworkers about the job-related emotions you struggle with.
- Talk to friends and family about how they can help you cope.
- Join a support group filled with people who face similar emotional challenges in their jobs.
- Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet.
- Explore meditation, prayer, and other activities that help you relax and get centered.
- Know when to quit. Your physical, mental, and emotional reserves aren't unlimited. Take a mental health day or schedule a vacation when you're feeling rundown or burned out.
- Reconnect with people and activities that are meaningful to you. The things you put on the back burner are often the ones that have the most restorative effects once you turn your attention toward them again.

## It's ok to put yourself first

Some people are wired in such a way that makes it difficult—either because of guilt or a sense of obligation—to put themselves first. If this sounds like you, remember this: You're most able to make a difference for someone else when you're healthy, energized, and emotionally stable.

**For more information, call your EAP  
800-540-3758**

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.