

- Empathy overload

FEELING EXHAUSTED? MAYBE IT'S EMPATHY

MANY PEOPLE CAN EXPERIENCE EMPATHY OVERLOAD, BUT IT'S OFTEN PRESENT IN THOSE IN THE HELPING PROFESSIONS, SUCH AS NURSES AND THERAPISTS.



IN 1978, Kathy Kleiner was asleep in her bed at the Chi Omega sorority house at Florida State

University when serial killer Ted Bundy entered through an unlocked door. After attacking two of her sorority sisters, Bundy found the door to Kathy's room also unlocked.

Kathy survived the attack and is one of only a few Bundy survivors. When we began writing her memoir, *A Light in the Dark: Surviving More Than Ted Bundy*, she said she wanted to weave in as many stories about the other victims as possible.

For about two years, I researched the more than 30 women and girls Bundy killed. By the time I started compiling their biographies for an appendix, I often felt stressed, saddened, and a bit on edge. There were certain victims who I thought about daily.

Later, I learned I had empathy overload, an experience that social scientists are finding can happen in both people's professional and their personal lives.

EMPATHY IS typically considered how a person understands and relates to others. Some scientists have suggested empathy evolved as a neurobiological process so that a person would be compelled to create and keep social bonds. These social bonds would motivate the person to get along with other group

members, as well as strive for their children's survival.

But a person can also experience too much empathy, or empathy overload — a type of compassion fatigue that occurs when they are negatively impacted after providing emotional support to others.

Although researchers agree on the concept of compassion fatigue, there isn't one set definition. In general, it involves secondary trauma in which a person's empathy and concern for another causes them to have ongoing, negative emotional and physical symptoms. People in helping professions, such as counselors, nurses, paramedics, physicians, psychologists, social workers, or teachers are more at risk for compassion fatigue.

Researchers typically consider compassion fatigue as distinct from burnout. Burnout is the frustration, powerlessness, and disillusionment a person might feel when they can't help others in a meaningful way. A nurse, for example, might feel burnout because their hospital is understaffed and they are too rushed to help patients the way they want. Similarly, a nurse might experience burnout because they care for patients who are part of a bigger problem that they don't have the power to solve, such as the opioid epidemic. By contrast, a nurse experiencing compassion fatigue might internalize the suffering of individual patients.

EACH PERSON can have a different experience with compassion fatigue or display different symptoms. Some people might experience an emotional numbness. Others might have physical symptoms such as appetite changes, fatigue, headaches, or a weakened immune system.

For me, I responded to the Bundy victim research with repressive behaviors. As a journalist, I didn't feel I was allowed to ... well, feel. It was my job to report the story accurately, not to reflect on how the story made me react. In response, I looked for outlets where I could let my emotions flow. I cried, for example, at Hallmark Christmas movies — not because they were sappy, but because I thought there was a sadness to films like *Finding Father Christmas*.

But as a journalist, I was also able to end my intensive research process and submit the book. My daily, constant inquiry into the Bundy victims concluded. Many people in helping professions, on the other hand, aren't able to simply end their exposure to secondary trauma.

For those who feel they have empathy overload, self-care practices and treating themselves with intentional kindness can help to reduce their symptoms. Other people might benefit from talk therapy — which researchers have found is the most effective approach to treating trauma. — EMILIE LE BEAU LUCCHESI