- Empathy overload

HOW CAN I BEAT COMPASSION FATIGUE?

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The idea of ‘compassion fatigue’ was first proposed in the context of nurses who spend their working days caring for people, showing them compassion and empathy – and sometimes witnessing them going through traumatic experiences.



There are really two parts to compassion fatigue. There’s the emotional exhaustion and sometimes there’s also the secondary trauma, from watching someone else suffer.

Of course, it’s not just nurses who can be at risk. It could affect anyone in a caring or related profession who is required to engage emotionally with others and/or watch them deal with difficult experiences. Even outside of a formal work role, you could be at risk if you spend a lot of your time showing up emotionally for someone else and/or seeing them suffer.

Research with nurses has revealed that compassion fatigue can manifest in at least two main ways. First, as a kind of emotional numbing (think of it like a defence mechanism that kicks in to prevent you from becoming completely emotionally drained).

Second, in physical symptoms, which can range from a stomach upset to fatigue and difficulty sleeping.

A 2022 paper interviewed nurses and some of their descriptions were particularly evocative. For instance, one of them described it as, “A different kind of fatigue; cloudy, deep, sweeping. Like being in a cloud, or tired from a hangover.”

Another, referring to the emotional numbing, put it this way: “A bit like [being] a kind of foil-clad person, in some way it bounces... what is said does not reach me all the way... it bounces back somehow.”

Unfortunately, studies on compassion fatigue show it can become selfperpetuating. The numbing effect can lead you to begin putting on a front – appearing to show care and empathy on the surface, while in reality, you aren’t experiencing these emotions. This disconnected state is uncomfortable and stressful, exacerbating your feelings of exhaustion. It can lead you to question your own values (e.g. I want to be a caring person, so why aren’t I feeling more concerned for this person?) leading you to question your very sense of self.

The good news is that there are now several studies, albeit of mixed quality, that point towards ways to cope with, and overcome, compassion fatigue. The main approach is to try to practise self-compassion.

Self-compassion involves making time to get some respite from caring for others. This could mean anything from setting aside time for walks in nature, mindfulness, exercise, reading, watching TV or making time to hang out with friends.

It sounds obvious, but it’s not always easy to do when you’re feeling emotionally drained. One trick is to imagine the advice about self-care you’d give to a friend who means a lot to you, and then apply that advice to yourself.