

Compassion Fatigue

Secondary Trauma, Vicarious Trauma

Reviewed by Psychology Today Staff

People whose professions lead to prolonged exposure to other people's trauma can be vulnerable to compassion fatigue, also known as secondary or vicarious trauma; they can experience acute symptoms that put their physical and mental health at risk, making them wary of giving and caring.



Feeling Another's Pain

Empathy is a valuable trait for the military, first responders, humanitarian aid workers, health care professionals, therapists, advocates for victims of domestic abuse, moderators of offensive online content, and journalists on the front lines of war and disaster. But the more such individuals open themselves up to others' pain, the more likely they will come to share those victims' feelings of heartbreak and devastation. This [sapped ability to cope](#) with secondary trauma can lead to total exhaustion of one's mental and physical state.

Those who regularly experience vicarious trauma often neglect their own self-care and inner life as they struggle with images and stories that can't be forgotten. [Symptoms](#) of compassion fatigue can include exhaustion, disrupted sleep, [anxiety](#), headaches, stomach upset, irritability, numbness, a decreased sense of purpose, emotional disconnection, self-contempt, and difficulties with personal relationships.

What causes compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue can affect the most [dedicated workers](#)—people who continue to help by working extra shifts or foregoing days off, neglecting their own self-care. This can result from exposure to a single case of trauma, or from years of accumulated “emotional residue.”



Compassion Fatigue in the General Public

A secondary definition of compassion fatigue refers to the experience of any empathetic individual who is acutely conscious of societal needs but feels helpless to solve them. People who actively engage in charity, or volunteering, may come to feel that they cannot commit any more energy, time, or money to the plight of others because they feel overwhelmed or paralyzed by pleas for support and that the world's challenges are never-ending.

Why are people more empathetic toward family and friends?

Evolutionary psychologists studying the development of human empathy suggest that we evolved to put our clan or family first and may struggle to [extend our empathy](#) to other groups. Some researchers even argue that empathy can fuel antisocial behavior such as [aggression](#).

Why are we more likely to help individuals, and not entire groups? Research findings show that people tend to be more responsive to [the needs of individuals](#) rather than that of groups, or of the world as a whole. For this reason, charitable organizations have learned to focus their campaigns on how donors can help individual victims, not suffering groups.

Why does watching the news make me feel despair?

How long does empathy last after a natural disaster?

Treating Compassion Fatigue



Hospitals, nursing and police unions, medical associations, [correctional facilities](#), and other professional groups have become more aware of the effects of secondary trauma and now urge those in the helping professions to offset such fatigue.

Can you prevent such fatigue?

We think someone else's problem is theirs, not ours. Yet [we are all linked](#) more than we realize. The more we bother to be a good influence in the world, the better the world will be—not just for others, but for us.

How do you treat compassion fatigue?

You can [counteract](#) such fatigue through regular exercise and healthy eating, a commitment to adequate rest and regular time off, and time in [therapy](#). It also helps to set emotional [boundaries](#) without barricading yourself from the world.

Do people self-medicate for compassion fatigue?

Experts on platforms like *Psychology Today* confirm that people experiencing compassion fatigue frequently self-medicate to numb their emotional distress or cope with vicarious trauma. Caregivers and helping professionals commonly use substances or addictive behaviors to find temporary relief.

Common Forms of Self-Medication

When dealing with the emotional and physical exhaustion of compassion fatigue, individuals may secretly turn to several unhealthy coping mechanisms:

- **Substances:** Alcohol and prescription drugs are frequently abused as "quick fixes" to dial down intense emotional pain or sleep disturbances.
- **Addictive Behaviors:** Gambling, overworking, and compulsive behaviors (such as using food or sex) are used to relieve personal stress and fill the emotional void.

Why People Self-Medicate

People in helping professions (healthcare, social work, emergency response) or those caring for loved ones are often highly empathetic and self-critical. When overwhelmed, they may feel they have no time for traditional self-care or that it is selfish to step away from their responsibilities. Self-medication becomes an accessible, immediate, albeit destructive, way to numb secondary traumatic stress.

Safer Alternatives

Relying on addictive behaviors ultimately escalates the problem and complicates an already overburdened mental state. Mental health experts suggest managing compassion fatigue through these healthier avenues:

Setting Boundaries: Creating strict emotional and professional limits without completely barricading yourself from the world.

Intentional Rest: Prioritizing adequate time off, healthy eating, and physical movement to naturally regulate the nervous system.

Professional Support: Seeking guidance through therapy to address the weight of secondary trauma. Use the Psychology Today Therapy Directory to find a local mental health professional