



Feeling Drained and Unfocused at Work?

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The profession of service coordination takes a great deal of compassion. As a service coordinator, you are faced with the daily task of serving others. No matter what resident population you work with, it can be a rather emotional experience. So what happens when you begin to notice you've focused so much of your attention on assisting others that you have forgotten about your needs? A service coordinator working with an elderly population is often faced with a number of sad issues. Between death and disease, the profession can begin to weigh on a person. Just the same, service coordinators working with families and individuals with disabilities also deal with many difficult issues. On top of the emotional issues, individuals in the social services field often find themselves stretched between helping more and more residents while also keeping up with the other administrative duties of the position. Add to that self-imposed pressures to be the best and most helpful and the service coordinator can become overwhelmed and drained. Service coordinators who are often unable to separate their work from their personal life could be suffering from a Secondary Traumatic

Stress Disorder known as Compassion Fatigue. According to Dr. Elaine Jurkowski, Assistant Professor and Graduate Program Director at Southern Illinois University Carbondale School of Social Work, compassion fatigue is a silent disease that impacts people who are increasingly stressed and impacted by trauma for long periods of time. "When you think of burnout, it's often something that's temporary and you can alleviate it," Jurkowski said. "Compassion fatigue is at the very end of the pendulum and once you get to that point, some theorists think you can't get out of it. It's a long-term burnout if you will." There are many signs of compassion fatigue, which include:

Attitudinal signs- An example is feeling you don't do as much or are as efficient in your work.

Behavioral signs- Examples include finding yourself complaining often, becoming more accident prone or losing things.

Physical signs- Examples include being chronically fatigued or finding yourself becoming sick more often. This can often result in the individual thinking something is physically wrong, when it's just the compassion fatigue.

"Commonly as we age, many of these physical things happen so (compassion fatigue is) kind of a silent disease because you think something else is happening when it's just the stress being caused on your body," Jurkowski said. Often, those who suffer from compassion fatigue find relationships with their family, friends, coworkers, etc., diminish due to their withdrawal from their loved ones. In the same sense, they can also feel a great sense of loneliness or isolation. The individual is not the only one who suffers from compassion fatigue. It also takes a toll on the workplace, causing less productivity. This can also result in higher turnover.

Some Tips for Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

1. At the interpersonal level, develop a network of support.

There are several ways you can help to overcome this silent disease. One way Jurkowski suggests is to have a social support network comprised of coworkers and other service workers who you can turn to and discuss your problems. “You can’t pretend the issues aren’t there,” she said. “So you find support such as a buddy in the workplace that you feel like you can share your problems with, without asking them to help you fix it but just acknowledge and listen to you debrief.”

2. On the agency level, making sure the work environment is friendly and conducive to productivity.

This means ensuring service coordinators have adequate resources and clerical support to complete their work, Jurkowski said. Also, the environment should be friendly and workloads should be manageable. Therefore, the lone service coordinator in a property of 300 residents may find his or her self having too much to manage.

3. Be clear what your role is in the property.

Individuals who don’t feel valued in their work environment can often find themselves suffering from compassion fatigue.

“There’s always a complaint box and complaint department, what about a bouquet box?” Jurkowski said. “Make sure there’s some autonomy so you have the authority to do what you need to do in your position because if not, it can lead to a real sense of frustration.”

4. Make sure and reconnect with yourself, your friends and your family.

Focusing on yourself can include stress reducers such as exercising, meditation or just simply eating better. Focusing on friends and family requires stopping the isolation and withdrawal from these groups.

There is a great deal of research on compassion fatigue. If you'd like to learn more about it, you can also visit the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project's website at www.compassionfatigue.org.

*Patricia Smith is a certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project© (www.compassionfatigue.org), the outreach division of Healthy Caregiving, LLC, she writes, speaks and facilitates workshops nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has authored several books including *To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving*, which is available at www.healthycaregiving.com or Amazon.com.*