



What is Compassion Fatigue?

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Compassion fatigue is the cumulative physical, emotional and psychological effect of exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity, combined with the strain and stress of everyday life.

It's important to note that compassion fatigue is different than burnout. While burnout is predictable, building over time and resulting in work dissatisfaction, compassion fatigue has a narrower focus. Someone affected by compassion fatigue may be harmed by the work they do, experiencing intrusive imagery and a change in world-view.

Compassion fatigue is also known as vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, second hand shock and secondary stress reaction. Regardless of the term used, compassion fatigue affects those in the helping professions, including the legal profession, and is treatable.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- Perceiving the resources and support available for work as chronically outweighed by the demands
- Having client/work demands regularly encroach on personal time
- Feeling overwhelmed and physically and emotionally exhausted
- Having disturbing images from cases intrude into thoughts and dreams
- Becoming pessimistic, cynical, irritable, and prone to anger
- Viewing the world as inherently dangerous, and becoming increasingly vigilant about personal and family safety
- Becoming emotionally detached and numb in professional and personal life; experiencing increased problems in personal relationships
- Withdrawing socially and becoming emotionally disconnected from others

- Becoming demoralized and questioning one's professional competence and effectiveness
 - Secretive self-medication/addiction (alcohol, drugs, work, sex, food, gambling, etc.)
 - Becoming less productive and effective professionally
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Treatment of Compassion Fatigue

There are ways to mitigate compassion fatigue.

Awareness. Understand what compassion fatigue is and periodically self-assess for it.

Debriefing. Talk regularly with another practitioner who understands and is supportive. This involves talking about the traumatic material, how you think and feel about it, and how you are personally affected by it.

Self-care. Proactively develop a program of self-care that is effective for you. This includes healthy eating, exercising regularly, getting adequate rest, and learning how to turn off the “fight-or-flight response” of your sympathetic nervous system and turn on the “relaxation response” of your parasympathetic nervous system.

Balance and Relationships. Take steps to simplify, do less, ask for help, and stop trying to be all things to all people, including your clients. Start thinking about how you can work on balance rather than the reasons you can't. Working to develop and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships will also increase your resilience.

Professional Assistance. Treatment from a licensed provider specializing in trauma may be beneficial.

Being Intentional. If you are overwhelmed and struggling with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, or compassion fatigue, put a plan for change in place.

Recognize that the attributes that contribute to your professional success (e.g., motivated, perfectionistic, achievement-oriented, driven, fixer) and your work environment may be contributing to an imbalance in your life.

Monitor your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Seek assistance to help you implement change and redirect the thoughts that tell you, “I should be able to do this by myself.” Your new mantra can become, “I don’t have to do it all by myself.”

How Compassion Fatigue Affects Lawyers

Lawyers, like others in the helping professions, are at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue. Lawyers in certain practice areas, such as criminal, family or juvenile law may be especially susceptible to compassion fatigue, as they are regularly exposed to human-induced trauma, and are called on to empathetically listen to victims’ stories, read reports and descriptions of traumatic events, view crime or accident scenes, and view graphic evidence of traumatic victimization. Those with high caseloads and those with a high capacity for empathy are also at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue.

Lawyer assistance programs (LAPs) are here to support lawyers, judges, students and other legal professionals who experience compassion fatigue. [Contact your state or local LAP.](#)

How to Help a Colleague Affected by Compassion Fatigue

If you believe a colleague may be experiencing compassion fatigue, encourage him/her to seek help. Contact a [LAP](#) for additional support and resources.

Resources:

[Self-Test for Compassion Fatigue](#)

[Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#)

[In Sight Article: A Traumatic Toll on Lawyers and Judges](#)

[Wisconsin Lawyer Article: The Toll of Trauma](#)

*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.*