



Compassion fatigue and its effects on caregivers

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Mother Teresa—an example of an extraordinary caregiver—ordered her nuns to take a year off from their duties every 4 to 5 years to allow them to heal from the effects of caregiving. Not everyone can take an extended break, but according to caregiving expert Patricia Smith, taking on the toll of others' suffering can lead to "compassion fatigue."

Compassion fatigue is a secondary traumatic stress disorder that is a reaction to the on-going demands of being compassionate in helping those who are suffering. Smith is the founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, a campaign that educates caregivers about sustainable and effective self-care. She is also the author of "Compassion Satisfaction: 50 Steps to Healthy Caregiving."

"Every day in our caregiving role we empty out in order to be present to those in our care," says Smith. "If we continue to empty out without filling up again, we place ourselves in harm's way. Caregivers often misinterpret their need for self-care as selfishness or self-centeredness."

As a result, caregivers can experience symptoms of isolation, recurring nightmares, emotional outbursts, substance abuse and an overall lack of self-care. And with that stress comes anger, frustration and guilt. Anyone who is in a role of caring, whether as a health professional, family caregiver or even animal aid worker, can experience compassion fatigue.

If the concept sounds similar to "post-traumatic stress disorder" or "burnout," that's because it is; however, the disorders are not all the same. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a *primary stress disorder* that is a result of exposure to extreme or traumatic events. Compassion fatigue is a *secondary stress disorder* because the stress happens to another person. The caregiver/helper then witnesses the stress and takes it on as his or her own.

According to Smith, caregivers can still be "healthy caregivers" by creating strong personal boundaries, adapting stress into relaxation and learning to practice daily self-care. They can also be empathetic and supportive of others suffering without taking on the pain as their own. This is called "empathetic discernment:" the art of knowing personal and emotional boundaries, as well as making choices about what to care about.

"Change takes time and if we concentrate on one goal at a time, the chances of being successful are better than if we take on too much at once," says Smith. "The main point is to find healthy rest and relaxation wherever it may be...our gift lies in the ability to walk the path *with* someone, not walk the path *for* someone."

Find out more about The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project and take their Life Stress and Compassion Fatigue self-tests to see if you may be experiencing symptoms.

*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.*