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'Compassion fatigue' can easily hurt caregivers' health, and more

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by Pamela Yip
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It's hard to grasp that caring too much for a sick person can hurt. But that's exactly what can happen to personal and professional caregivers who experience "compassion fatigue". They begin to feel deep physical and emotional exhaustion. And they often experience a pronounced change in their ability to feel empathy for their patients, their loved ones and their co-workers.

"It is marked by increased cynicism at work, a loss of enjoyment of work, a loss of enjoyment of our career, and eventually can transform into depression, secondary traumatic stress and stress-related illness," said Sharyn Fein, president of Ed-U-Care Inc., a Dallas nonprofit organization that helps caregivers deal with compassion fatigue.

"The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brought us into this work: our empathy and compassion for others."

Ed-U-Care last week held its fourth annual Compassion Fatigue Symposium.

“Compassion fatigue is rampant both nationally and right here in the metroplex,” Fein said. “Medical and mental health care professionals, emergency care workers, clergy, counselors and volunteers who work with very sick or troubled people are particularly susceptible to compassion fatigue.

“But anyone who is called upon to perform frequent acts of care, such as caring for a gravely ill or elderly loved one or doing volunteer work at a crisis center, is vulnerable.”

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, other symptoms include:

- Excessive blaming.
- Bottled-up emotions.
- Isolation from others.
- Substance abuse.
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling and sexual addictions.
- Poor self-care, such as neglecting personal hygiene and appearance.

“The issue for family caregivers is sustainability,” said Dee Wadsworth, gerontologist at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church. “Most families can manage a crisis situation for about three months. After that, the chronic conditions and needs get harder and harder.”

Compassion fatigue can also have financial impacts for those being cared for. “A compassion-fatigued caregiver could certainly be susceptible to breaking the rules with someone else’s money,” said Patricia Smith, founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project and the keynote speaker at the symposium.

“This happens when a caregiver feels he or she has better judgment and decision-making skills than others. “Often there is a feeling of entitlement associated with compassion fatigue and that others owe them for providing care. Mishandling someone else’s funds is one way to acknowledge they have leveled the playing field.”

This is particularly true if money is not available for a skilled nursing or assisted living facility. “When siblings need to gather their own resources to care for an aging or disabled parent, many unresolved issues will surface,” Smith said. “Unfortunately, there is the other side of that coin, wherein the caregiver takes advantage of money belonging to the person being cared for and uses it without the knowledge of that person. These actions border on elder abuse.”

Caregivers can also have reduced hours at work, unpaid leave and lost promotions, said Kay Paggi, a Dallas geriatric care manager. Forty-six percent of family caregivers spend more than \$5,000 per year on caregiving expenses, according to Caring.com. It’s important not to neglect yourself if you’re a caregiver. You can’t help your loved one if you’re in poor health yourself.

“Healing the symptoms of compassion fatigue is an inside job,” Smith said.

*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.*