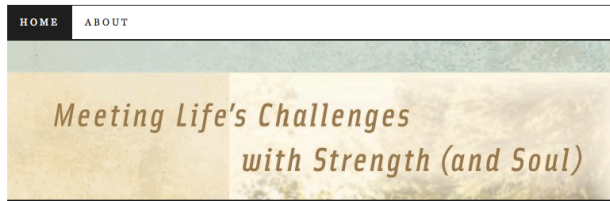


## **Burdens Do a Body Good**



## **Compassion Fatigue and the Female Caregiver**

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We female caregivers are more likely than our male counterparts to suffer the negative effects of caregiving. Our penchant for caregiving is wrapped up in our survival as a species and most likely in our DNA. If we don't nourish and protect our young they can die, and continuation of our species would be in grave danger.

While caregiving brings great joy and satisfaction to most of us, this predisposition to caregiving has a down side. We are more prone to place the needs of others before our own needs. If not balanced with authentic, sustainable self-care practices daily, this behavior leads to stress, burnout and possibly compassion fatigue. Stress is all about too much – too much work, too much activity, too much stimulus. Burnout is about too little – too little time, too little interest, too little energy.

Compassion fatigue is a set of symptoms, when left unmanaged, can devastate the life of a female caregiver. Compassion fatigue takes hold when we experience secondary traumatic stress due to witnessing another's story of physical, emotional and spiritual pain. Simply put, we strongly relate to that pain and begin to take on another's suffering as our own. Since relating to others is often valued by females, chances for high levels of compassion fatigue are prevalent among our ranks.

Specific symptoms associated with compassion fatigue are:

*Isolation*

*Bottled up emotions*

*Persistent sadness and apathy*

*Voicing excessive complaints about co-workers and management*

*Lack of interest in self-care practices*

*Recurring nightmares, flashbacks*

*Persistent ailments such as allergies, colds, gastrointestinal problems*

The first step in avoiding compassion fatigue is awareness. It is vitally important we know and understand the symptoms are real and, while they never disappear, can be managed when healing occurs. Many of us grew up in the role of family caregiver. Since our formation years were spent on caring for others, we never mastered life skills to protect our own resources – time, energy, finances, etc.

Many of us gave until there was nothing left to give- and then we gave more. The premise of healthy caregiving is this: Fill up, empty out. Fill up, empty out. Those of us at risk for compassion fatigue empty out, empty out, empty out. We never learned to fill up so we have something to give. In the end, we experience depletion of body, mind and spirit.

The art of “*filling up*” is finding what brings us peace, wholeness and a sense of belonging. This can be something as simple as running, walking in nature, knitting, or riding a bicycle. Whatever it is that we choose to do must be authentic to us – not anyone else. Often it takes work for a lifelong caregiver to figure out her passion.

Step One in rediscovering the authentic self is to practice personal

boundaries- when to say yes and when to say no. We must reclaim our resources so we have time to fill ourselves up. Depending on how long we have denied our own needs, this journey can be arduous and difficult. *Saying no doesn't come easy to those of us who value helping others.*

One last note: I hear from caregivers worldwide who ask about breaking free of their addiction to technology. Because we love our iPhones, Blackberries, iPads, and pagers, we are now “on call” 24/7, leaving no time to fill up and restore our sanity. Setting boundaries helps. Check email at 9 am, noon and 6 pm only. Limit how much time to spend on your cell phone. Take a complete break from technology on weekends. Find what works for you and practice it regularly. This is our best assurance against stress, burnout and compassion fatigue. By achieving daily authentic, sustainable self-care, we learn that it is possible to provide quality, compassionate care to others while applying quality, compassionate care to ourselves.

*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](http://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](http://www.healthycaregiving.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).*