



Note to Self: Let it Go

February 2011

by Patricia Smith

Founder, Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project

Web: www.compassionfatigue.org

www.facebook.com/compassionfatigue

Media Contact for www.compassionfatigue.org:

Dell Richards Publicity

916-455-4790

dell@dellrichards.com

After a day spent caring for her mother, who has advanced Alzheimer's, Susan Schneider often finds herself feeling dark and gray.

But instead of reaching for a chunk of chocolate or a glass of Chardonnay for relief, the 54-year-old graphic designer from Monterey, Calif., heads outside to the garbage can and mentally "tosses" her stress-filled thoughts into the waiting cylinder. "My rule is once they are in the trash, I don't revisit them," she says.

This "letting go" ritual allows Susan to decompress quickly and transition to a healthier state of mind — not an easy task for the approximately 45 million caregivers in the U.S. challenged by the persistent demands of the role. The stress of aiding an ill or elderly family member can lead to something called "compassion fatigue," a collection of symptoms that develop when you take on

the pain, suffering and trauma of another person. Despair, isolation, apathy — even substance abuse and sleep disorders — are common among caregivers who lack a release valve for the day-to-day pressure of caring for a loved one, especially on top of other family and work responsibilities.

As a caregiver myself and the founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, I've witnessed firsthand the effects of compassion fatigue. It's no news that we caregivers tend not only to shoulder the burdens of others, but do so at the expense of our well-being. We give, give, give, until there's nothing left — and even then, we give some more. Practicing self-care is the only way to combat compassion fatigue, and learning to let go of troubling thoughts and feelings is a step in the right direction.

Family and professional caregivers alike benefit from "letting go" rituals. Emergency room nurse Renee Wood, of Clearwater, Fla., copes by listing a negative thought, such as "overworked," and then an associated feeling, such as "overwhelmed." Pen in hand, she does a bit of editing, substituting, for instance, "job security" for "overworked" and "competent" for "overwhelmed." She explains, "And then I stay with the positive feeling." Social worker Michele McKnight of Fresno, Calif., retreats into solitude. "There is much merit in quietness," she offers. "When I emerge from my self-imposed exile, all is calm, within and without."

Letting go can be as simple as finding a park bench where you can sit and journal, locating a nursery or garden and stopping to smell the roses (a cliché, I know, but it really can help), or, after soaking in a warm tub, visualizing your troubles going down the drain. All it takes is finding something that's meaningful to you (and healthier, perhaps, than overindulging at happy hour). Years ago, working at an assisted living facility on the California coast, I left the building heavy-hearted. Scratching a word in the sand expressing my despair, I watched as waves rolled over it, carrying my sorrows out to sea.

Today, walking my fox terrier, Mitchel, lifts my sagging spirits. As I watch him examine every rock and leaf in his path, his canine enthusiasm reminds me I may travel the same path every day, but blessings are ever-present and waiting to be sniffed out.

*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.*