Compassion Fatigue

December 2009

by Gary Shunk and Megan Wells
Financial Advisor Magazine, Private Wealth Magazine

Web: www.compassionfatigue.org
www.facebook.com/compassionfatigue

Media Contact for www.compassionfatigue.org:
Dell Richards Publicity
916-455-4790
dell@dellrichards.com

Like caregivers in other disasters, financial advisors are experiencing the same trauma symptoms of the clients they are trying to help.

This past year, I have been speaking to financial professionals about psychologically reframing the current financial and economic downturn as an “economic trauma.”

For many wealth holders, the emotional shock of these economic times has been a deeply distressing experience. For advisors, the emotional impact on clients has demanded new skills and, in some cases, has caused advisors to experience secondary trauma. This second tier of trauma is referred to as “compassion fatigue.”

Remember September 11, 2001? For days, weeks and months, many of us anticipated the next volley of plane attacks. Similarly, when the markets crashed in late 2008 we were numbed by the prolonged trauma on Wall Street, Main Street and the world. Thoughts of the "Great Depression" dominated people's thoughts, as many wondered if history was repeating itself. Many investors reacted with anxiety and anger. Irrational decisions were made. Clients fired advisors and moved accounts to other firms. Assets were moved out of stocks at low value points, into cash or other "safe" securities.

In a 2005 interview with Medscape.com, Charles Figley, a professor at Tulane University who is a prominent expert on trauma and disasters, defined compassion fatigue as "a state experienced by those helping people in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it is traumatizing for the helper."

The end result is that aid givers suffer from the same symptoms as the trauma victims they are trying to help.

"The helper suffers through his or her own efforts to empathize and be compassionate. Often, this leads to poor self care and extreme self sacrifice in the process of helping," Figley said. "Together, this leads to compassion fatigue and symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

Most financial professionals operate primarily from the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls linear, logical and rational thought. The right hemisphere deals with emotions and the non-rational, non-linear issues in life. Since the downturn, many financial advisors and family office professionals have witnessed a surge of emotionality in their practice lives. This has caused them to work out of the right hemisphere. Just as a weak muscle fatigues from sudden overuse, advisors are fatiguing on the right side of the brain. Being constantly pushed to practice right-brain empathy by this surge of client anxiety (through e-mails, phone calls and face-to-w face encounters with clients, colleagues and even friends), professionals are beginning to experience compassion fatigue.

“I can see why advisors are feeling horrendous,” says Patricia Smith, founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, an organization devoted to promoting awareness and understanding of compassion fatigue. “Money affects peoples’ lives profoundly.”

Repeated contacts with clients who are contentious, angry and anxious about the financial and economic environment can take their toll on any advisor, Smith says.

“They get drained,” Smith says, adding that advisors can feel “emptied out” on a physical, emotional and spiritual level. The fatigue comes when advisors fail to take care of themselves and “fill up” again, she says. Simple things such as eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising and engaging in yoga, meditation or other relaxing activities are some of the ways advisors can recuperate, she says. An in-office visit by an expert on compassion fatigue also acts as a remedy, she says.

Two warning signs of compassion fatigue are guilt and indecision, experts say. Advisors with compassion fatigue may find themselves feeling a sense of guilt. Though they are not personally responsible for Wall Street’s decline, they still may feel responsible for their clients’ investment losses. This guilt may seem logical and rational, but in truth, inappropriate guilt is a symptom of fatigue, according to experts.

Loss of confidence can result in indecision, experts say. Advisors, for example, may be stuck in a state of inaction for fear of causing further client losses.

Other signs of compassion fatigue can be irritability, sadness, a sense of heaviness or pointlessness, and even rage—symptoms that can, over time, impact an advisor’s decisions and job performance if left untreated, according to experts.

For those who suspect they may be suffering from compassion fatigue, The Compassion Fatigue Awareness project offers a self-testing tool on its Web site, at www.compassionfatigue.org.

Educational information about compassion fatigue, including ways in which caregivers can help themselves, is also available at www.greencross.org.

In some cases, firms are taking proactive steps to prevent compassion fatigue from impacting their staffs. At the end of 2008, Kirby Rosplock, director of research and development with GenSpring Family Office, mandated a review of client families' capital sufficiency needs. The review looked at how the downturn impacted those needs, where the client wanted to invest from that point forward and how the firm would help them achieve those goals.

Charlotte Beyer, founder and CEO of the Institute for Private Investors, noted that among her firm's family clients, she saw a significant difference in response based on attitude. Families that were "not abdicators," according to Beyer, remained active, collaborating participants with advisors. These investors were not seeking someone to blame. Instead they experienced "humility," she says. One client discovered he would rather miss a good opportunity to invest than lose principal, Beyer says.

Of the families that felt victimized and looked for someone or something to blame, stress was high, she says. Beyer emphasized the importance of advisors having empathy for their clients, but not being a doormat.

Returning to the metaphor of an unused muscle being suddenly used to the point of strain, it is important to develop empathy skills as if it were a muscle needing balance in the work out. Here are some basic skills to begin: • Try to assess your own level of fatigue. • Examine feelings of inappropriate guilt or chronic indecision. • Take an inventory of your output versus input. Are you giving out too much without filling back up? • Commit to a healthy sleep schedule. • Feed your sense of humor. • Limit the use of alcohol or food as a stress reducer. • Talk to fellow advisors to get tips and perspective. • Practice listening to clients with balanced empathy. • Remember that though you may feel bad for your client, the situation is not necessarily your fault. • You can listen and understand a client's emotions but remember that you can't change their emotions. • Fixing is not always needed. Time heals many fears. • Be patient with yourself, your clients and the economy.

One of the silver linings of the economic downturn is that the financial industry is moving from left-brain to whole-brain thinking. The development of right-brain emotion, creativity and insight in the financial advisory profession will have a significant impact on the future economy.

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 facilities 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.