



How 'Continued Coverage' Can Do Long-Term Damage

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The April 15th bombings that shattered the innocence and joy of the annual Boston Marathon have left us stunned and shaking our heads in disbelief - once again. But in time, healing will occur and most of us will return to our normal routines. Sadly, this may not be true of the first responders, medical professionals, law enforcement officers and bystanders who witnessed this traumatic event first-hand.

In the days ahead, those who provided care to others may begin to experience emotional and physical exhaustion. As their sense of personal safety and security erodes, a set of symptoms known as compassion fatigue can take hold. Symptoms include isolation, emotional outbursts, substance abuse, sadness, apathy, hyper-vigilance and recurring nightmares of the tragic scene. If left unattended, this disorder can create chaos in the life of a caregiver.

Thirteen years ago, my own experience with this downside of caregiving led me to create the **Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project**©. I set out to educate caregivers in helping professions, as well as family caregivers, about compassion fatigue, its symptoms and causes. I have seen how constant exposure to the pain and suffering of others can profoundly affect the most compassionate and empathetic helpers. I've watched competent, highly skilled caregivers leave their chosen field due to the disillusionment compassion fatigue imposes on those who care.

But I've also witnessed the resiliency and unbridled commitment of compassion-fatigued caregivers who choose the healing path by embracing authentic, sustainable self-care practices. Self-care consists of eating nutritious food, exercising regularly, enjoying 8 hours of restful sleep nightly, drinking eight glasses of water daily, and maintaining supportive relationships. While they may sound simple, these healthy modes of coping build resiliency and allow traumatized caregivers to return to high-functioning levels so they can continue to be of service to others. While we offer thanks to the courageous caregivers in Boston, we must also be mindful of our own vulnerability to the effects of trauma. Constant viewing of the disturbing images in the newspaper, on websites, iPhones or Facebook pages holds the power to re-traumatize and put us at risk for compassion fatigue. Instead, by following the self-care regimen above, practicing patience with ourselves and others during this highly stressful time, and by simply breathing deeply, we can sustain good health and affect healing both without and within.

For additional information on trauma and how to cope, go to the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org) and the American Psychological Association (www.apa.org) websites. If the symptoms of compassion fatigue continue and worsen, it may be necessary to consult with a mental health professional.

*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.*