Helping the Helpers: 
The Journey from Compassion Fatigue to Resilience
Cynthia Vrabel MD

Objectives:
• Define the concept of compassion fatigue and identify factors which may contribute to it’s development.
• Recognize common manifestations of compassion fatigue.
• Describe practical strategies which promote personal, professional and organizational resilience.

A Moment for Reflection:
• What drew you to this work?
• What is the best thing about your work?
• What is the most challenging thing about your work?
• What do you do to cope with job stress?

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”
Martin Luther King Jr.

Trauma Exposure: Personal Impact for Helpers
• Compassion Satisfaction
• Compassion Fatigue
• Vicarious Trauma
• Burnout

Compassion Fatigue: (Figley, 1995)
• The work of helping traumatized people is gratifying but also brings risks.
• Helpers can experience pain as a direct result of exposure to other’s traumatic material.
• The Cost of Caring.
Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995

- Vicarious trauma is the transformation in the inner experience of the therapist that results from empathic engagement with a client’s trauma material.

- Empathy = lowering resistance or separation to allow a connection with another’s experience.

The Role of Exposure in the Development of Compassion Fatigue:

- How one is exposed is not as important as the extent to which the helper “takes in” the material.

- “Taking in” refers to a process where the normal ego defenses which allow some distance from what is heard or observed are weakened.

- The unique connection between survivor and helper.

Compassion Fatigue

Key Concepts:

- The emotional residue of working with suffering clients.

- The effects are cumulative.

- A normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Compassion Fatigue vs Burnout:

- Burnout is a stage of extreme dissatisfaction with one’s work characterized by excessive distancing, impaired competence and irritability.

- The nature of the workplace not the nature of the work.

The Trauma Exposure Response

- Manifests in the cognitive, behavioral and emotional life of the helper.

- Individualized

- Dynamic

Lipsky 2010

Cognitive Manifestations of Compassion Fatigue:

- Alterations in Cognitive Schema especially relating to safety and relationships.

- Intrusive Thoughts

- Cynicism

- Grandiosity

- Guilt

- Inability to Embrace Complexity

- A Sense of Persecution
Behavioral Manifestations of Compassion Fatigue:

- Avoidance
- Isolation
- Boundary Issues
- Exhaustion
- Addictions
- Hypervigilence
- Diminished Creativity
- Working All the Time
- Absenteeism/Tardiness

Emotional Manifestations of Compassion Fatigue:

- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Hopelessness/Helplessness
- Numbing
- Anger/Fear
- Irritability

"And the dim fluorescent lighting is meant to emphasize the general absence of hope."

"Listen, pal, they're all emargains."

"I bark at everything. Can't go wrong that way."
Compassion Fatigue
Contributing Factors:
• Lack of Experience.
• Trauma Caseload: Hours per week spent with traumatized clients.
• Exposure to Child or Sexual Assault Victims.
• Low Level of Social Recognition.
• Primary Trauma in the Workplace.

Compassion Fatigue
Individual Vulnerabilities:
• Personal Trauma History
• Coping Style – Locus of Control
• Current Life Situation

Compassion Fatigue
Self-Assessment Tools:
• Compassion Satisfaction/Fatigue Self Test for Helpers (Figley, 1995)
• Professional Quality of Life Scale proqol.org (Hudnall Stamm, 2009)

Trauma Stewardship:
A Map for the Journey
• We create space for and honor others suffering but do not assume their pain as our own.
• We care for others but we do not take on their path as our path.
• We maintain a long term strategy that allows us to remain whole and helpful to others.
  Lipsky (2009)

Resilience:
• The power to cope with adversity and adapt to challenges or change.
• Emerging from stressful situations feeling normal and perhaps even stronger than before.
• A Dynamic Process of Prevention or Recovery

Resilience
Core Elements:
• Self Knowledge and Insight.
• Sense of Hope.
• Healthy Coping.
• Strong Relationships.
• Personal Perspective and Meaning.
**Personal Resilience:**

- A Set of Learned Behavioral Competencies.

- By validating ourselves we promote acceptance.

- By meeting our own mental, physical and emotional needs, we give care from a place of abundance, not scarcity.

**Operationalizing Self Care:**

- Awareness

- Balance

- Connection

- Discharge What is Harmful

- Embrace What is Helpful

**Awareness**

- Mindfulness and Acceptance.

- Mindfulness – paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

- An Exquisite Quality of Being.

**Balance**

- To do list:
  1. Very important stuff
  2. Other important items
  3. Don’t forget to eat
  4. Sleep would be good.
Connection

Discharge

Embrace

Organizational Resilience:

• Organizations have an ethical duty to address the issue of Compassion Fatigue.
• Support following traumatic events.
• Caseload management
• Necessary tools and resources to do the job.
• Employee benefits which facilitate self care.

Professional Resilience:

• Education: Trauma-informed, Job-specific, User-friendly and Regularly Scheduled.

• Individual and Group Supervision: Clinical Problem Solving and Active Support.

• Professional Organizations
Creating a Culture of Thriving

- Strength-based Resiliency-focused Activities
- Creating Space
- Evidence-based Practices
- Trauma Informed Care

I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness, The Astonishing Light of Your Own Being.

Hafiz

Contact Information:

cyndi@mhs-inc.org