

Compassion Recovery Journal



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INTRODUCTION

I first heard the phrase “compassion fatigue” about ten years ago, and nobody had to explain it to me – I knew in an instant what it was attempting to describe. I think it was in connection to disaster aid workers who returned home feeling exhausted, burned out, even depressed. More recently, I have seen the term applied to everyone from nurses to family caregivers to mothers with young children. As a pastor for over 25 years, the last ten of which were spent working with college students – certainly not the same kind of crisis setting as relief workers face – I sometimes experienced a sense that no matter how much I did for students, faculty, or staff in need, it was never enough. Problems arose faster and with more intensity than my solutions or efforts could manage. Such things weighed on my mind and my heart, even when I was at home, on vacation, or sleeping (as my anxious dreams suggested).

The idea that one could become “fatigued” from sharing compassion seemed counter to many of the religious teachings with which I had grown up – or at least the way they had been interpreted to me. And yet the very word compassion literally means “to suffer with.” It’s one of the most profound human traits, this ability to *feel what others feel*. And helpers tend to spend a lot of time with people who feel pain. So we quite literally feel their pain. Sometimes so much that it’s hard to feel anything else... other than, maybe, numbness. The lack of feeling.

My guess is that you would not be reading this unless you suspect that you or people with whom you work or live have some degree of compassion fatigue. I hope that this journal may help you or others begin to take steps to overcome – or better yet, prevent – that fatigue, so that a) you may more fully and deeply enjoy your life, b) you may be more productive in your efforts to help in whatever way(s) you choose and, c) others will learn from your new attitudes and practices of self-care. I have included several pages with space for self-reflective responses – be both honest and gentle with yourself. If you are experiencing compassion fatigue, remember that your compassion comes from your loving heart and don’t forget to extend that love to yourself!

Dana W. Sutton

WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Some psychologists describe compassion fatigue in terms similar to those of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but rather than the result of a singular or series of intense traumatic events, compassion fatigue is the result of long-term stress related to caring for others. Others connect it with a traditional definition of “burnout,” but using language that relates more directly to those who work or volunteer in “helper” settings. These include people in non-profit or religious organizations, teachers, health care workers (including mental health care), emergency responders (police, EMTs, firefighters, disaster teams), and others. Often burnout is associated with “Type A” personalities; people who are aggressive, driven, achievement-oriented go-getters. In reality, many helpers are also very driven, though not by achieving things for themselves, but rather for others. Those who have a great deal of compassion for and work to help others are particularly at risk of experiencing fatigue when their efforts to help are:

- a) Rejected, whether openly or through a failure to act by the intended recipients of help
- b) Inadequate to meet the needs of the recipients, whether because of their own limitations (time, energy, etc.) or because of the limitations of the system in which they work (
- c) Not supported by adequate self care
- d) Performed without an awareness of the benefits and costs to the helper

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Think of a time when you have offered help and it has been rejected – how did you feel after the rejection?
- 2) Recall a day when the needs of those with whom you work felt overwhelming – just too much for the time, money, or other resources available. What did you experience when you went home that day?

SYMPTOMS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE

(Used by permission of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project – www.compassionfatigue.org)

- Excessive blaming
- Bottled up emotions
- Isolation from others
- Receives unusual amount of complaints from others
- Voices excessive complaints about administrative functions
- Substance abuse used to mask feelings
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling, sexual addictions
- Legal problems, indebtedness
- Recurrence of nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic event
- Chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems and recurrent colds
- Apathy, sad, no longer finds activities pleasurable
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mentally and physically tired
- Preoccupied
- In denial about problems

Such symptoms can affect us deeply – and not just in our work lives. Our fatigue affects our happiness, our relationships, our success, our engagement in any area of life, taking at least part of our attention away from anything else we're doing or anyone else we're with. ***NOTE: If you feel constantly physically fatigued, please see your physician to rule out a physical illness or condition.*** The severity of compassion fatigue can differ greatly from one person to another, but if you have more than 5 of these symptoms, you are likely experiencing some degree of fatigue.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) How many of these symptoms have you experienced in the past six months? How many of them have you noticed in co-workers or colleagues?
- 2) On a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the highest), how acceptable is it to talk about such symptoms in your organization?

SCARCITY OF SELF/SOUL

In a previous version of this journal, I said, “To put it most simply, a great deal of compassion fatigue is the result of inadequate self-care.” While I don’t exactly disagree with that assessment, putting pressure on compassionate people to be “better” about their self-care may only lead to feelings of guilt and greater fatigue (“blaming the victim”). So what are the roots of compassion fatigue that make self-care feel *selfish*?

A perspective of *scarcity* tends to affect many – if not most – people’s lives. How this often shows up for helpers is in the sense that your time and energy – your *self/soul* – is a limited commodity; any time and energy you spend on yourself feels selfish, as though you were “stealing” from others.

Here is a list of some attitudes that can contribute to compassion fatigue that are related to a sense of scarcity:

- Others’ happiness matters more than mine OR My happiness (or sometimes even my family’s happiness!) is not as important
- There is always more to do and not enough time
- I can never be “off the clock”
- My primary purpose in life is to take care of others
- Taking care of myself takes time and energy away from others
- I’m here to give, not to receive. A familiar Bible passage says: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” [Note that this phrase doesn’t say it’s BAD to receive!]
- I can only take care of so many people, and I’m not one of them

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Where did your attitudes about self-care come from? (Parents, grandparents, role models – teacher, pastors, etc.) What (if any) were some of their self-care practices?
- 2) On a scale of 1-10, how OK are you with the idea that you need to take care of yourself in order to take care of others? Be honest!
- 3) What would it take for you to improve that number by 1-2 points?

SELF-ABUNDANCE

A different way of seeing the self/soul is to consider *abundance*. An abundant perspective is that there is always enough to go around; enough for ourselves and enough to share with others. It can apply to things like natural resources, food, money, time, or our own (hard to measure) energy. Believing that there isn't enough – *scarcity* – for some people means working extra hard to make sure that at least *they* have enough. But for helpers, it means a kind of constant internal and external scrambling just to make ends meet for the people they want to help. By contrast, *abundance* affirms *hope* – what is really possible is beyond what we can see or perceive.

If you believed that you could connect to a limitless source of energy – which for some means God and for others, simply the shared energy of the universe – how might that change your willingness to seek things like joy, creativity, and passion?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Think about a time or situation in your life where others perceived scarcity – that something was impossible because of lack of time or resources. How might their thinking have created barriers to finding solutions?
- 2) How has someone else had a positive impact on your life by believing and affirming that something *was* possible even in moments when you couldn't see any way forward?
- 3) What is a way that scarcity shows up for you (work, home, personal relationships) that if you tilted even a little bit more toward an abundance perspective, it might make a huge difference? Without committing to anything just yet, what are 2-3 steps you could take to start “imagining” abundance? Examples:
 - a. If you had 2 hours a day just to do something fun – with no obligations – what are some things you would do?
 - b. If you/your organization suddenly had more money than you needed, what would be different?
 - c. If the people you want to help suddenly needed 75% less help, how might it change the way you spend your time?

THE COMPLICATED MATH OF HELPING OTHERS

Think of examples of people you have known who had great positive impacts on the world. How many of them tried to help every single person they met? How long would they have been able to keep going if they had tried? And how many more people did they end up impacting as a result of a slower, steadier pace?

It's part of the nature of helpers to pour out... we don't tend to be as good at pouring into our own reservoirs of joy, energy, etc. And when we begin to run low, how effective are we really at helping others? Not to mention how pleasant (or not!) we are to be around, or how much joy we really get to experience. So if you *really* do the math, taking into account all the costs and benefits of different approaches to helping, what makes the most sense to you? If you believe your purpose in this world is to make a difference, to help others, how much more good are you likely to do if you're at it for 20, 30, 40 years or more, rather than the 5-10 that is far more typical for people in helping professions?

The problem with talking about "self-care," as I see it, is in the first part – self. Helping others is all about... well... *others*, so bringing "self" into the conversation may feel like a betrayal of our deepest identity as someone who gives. After all, we're told "It is more blessed to give than to receive." But to put it bluntly, *we can't keep giving without also receiving!*

- 1) What are some ways you have enjoyed being taken care of?
Maybe as a child, as a partner, as part of a valued, appreciated group...?
- 2) How hard is it for you to admit/share your own needs with others? What if you perceived that doing so is a gift to others who would enjoy providing some of the help you need?
- 3) If self-care is hard for you to talk about, what if you considered the possibilities of "soul-care" rather than "self-care?" How might that shift some energy blocks or obstacles for you?

COMPASSION AND SELF AWARENESS

The role of self-awareness goes far beyond just “getting in touch with ourselves.” Psychologists, counselors, and coaches have documented the strong role of self-awareness in:

- Effective leadership
- Happiness
- Fulfilling and stable relationships
- Sustainable growth and change
- Successful achievement of life goals and dreams

Self-awareness is seldom (if ever) something we’re born with. But it can deepen at any age. It involves careful, intentional reflection about our own thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, and ultimately leads to the ability to *choose* those behaviors, rather than merely reflecting on them after the fact. *Acting* rather than *reacting* involves conscious (instead of unconscious) decisions in each moment, and especially in times of stress – which can be anything from another driver cutting us off on the highway to the death of a loved one. One great truth about life is that “Stress Happens.” We can’t change that – but we *can* change how we respond to stress, how long and how powerfully it negatively affects us, how quickly we bounce back, and what we learn from it that helps us grow.

One way to become more self-aware is to learn how:

Our Thoughts → Our Feelings → Our Actions

Any thought we have leads to a feeling, which in turn leads to an action or series of actions. Each thought also has a consequence for the kind of energy that we experience as a result. When we become more aware of our thoughts – particularly in stressful situations – we gradually gain the ability to choose the thoughts that will be most helpful/powerful for us, and therefore to act in ways that can bring positive change for us and for others. As we understand more deeply how our thoughts about self-care are affecting our results, we can begin to change those thoughts and our life practices to bring about the results we really want.

ABUNDANCE PRACTICES

There is a kind of “chicken and egg” relationship between our self-esteem (or self-value) and our practices of self-care. When we change our attitudes we will change our practices; but if we change our practices, we can also change our attitudes. If you find yourself having a difficult time shifting your thoughts about yourself, try starting with some of these practices. Begin with one and plan to add a new one each month:

- ✓ Healthy Eating
- ✓ Regular Exercise – Walk, run, work-out, play tennis, etc. One of the best ways to reduce/manage stress
- ✓ Nurturing Supportive Relationships: Spending time with “Anabolic” friends – people who you are happy to see, who help you have a net gain in your energy when you spend time with them
- ✓ Participation in groups that have nothing to do with your work setting:
 - Book clubs
 - Bridge clubs
 - Hiking groups
 - Musical/singing groups
 - Drama
 - Prayer groups
- ✓ Scheduling your most intense work activities at times when you generally feel you’re “at your best” (as much as this is up to you...)
- ✓ Adequate sleep – For some, “power naps” are a good way to catch up, but most sleep experts suggest at least 7 hours of sleep at night.
- ✓ Turn off the cell phone or computer – For at least a little while each day, take a sabbatical from any electronic communication. Suggestion: Start with 30 minutes and work up
- ✓ Take vacations or “stay-cations” – Either way, do your best to ensure that your work doesn’t “follow you.” Create auto-email



responses and voicemail messages letting people know when they can expect a response from you.

- ✓ Daily reflection or prayer time
- ✓ 3 Best Things Exercise: An hour or so after you wake up, make a list of the 3 best things that have happened to you so far. Stretch to name things if you have to: coffee was hot, back didn't hurt, etc. Throughout the day, replace things on the list with better things that happen. The list always stays at 3, but they get better and better, and so does your energy!
- ✓ Daily Intention
- ✓ I will seek to avoid judging things/people today as either good or bad
- ✓ I will pay attention to my energy and notice my thoughts when I feel catabolic energy (Apathy or Anger)
- ✓ I will look for opportunities in every situation
- ✓ Use assessment tools to increase self-awareness (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Enneagram, or Energy Leadership Index)
- ✓ I will pay more attention to the presence than to the absence of God/Spirit/the Holy (where God is than where God is not)
- ✓ Journaling - (A friend of mine has put together a great resource for those who want to begin the practice of journaling. Contact me for a copy of this resource – dana@yourselfcarecoach.com)
- ✓ Coaching and/or Counseling (including pastoral counseling)
- ✓ Walking away – Leaving a job/situation that is draining you. This may or may not be a last resort, depending on the severity of the stressor and the ability you have to make changes within the system.

Which 3 of those practices are most appealing to you? Add them to your Transition Plan in the next section!

1)

2)

3)

3 MONTH SELF-CARE TRANSITION PLAN

What steps will you take to change your attitudes and practices around self-care? Making a plan is a concrete step that signals to yourself and others that you are no longer willing to accept things the way they currently are. Creating new intentions is the next step to creating change.

Month	Actions
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Example: I will journal at least 3 times/week</i>•••
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••

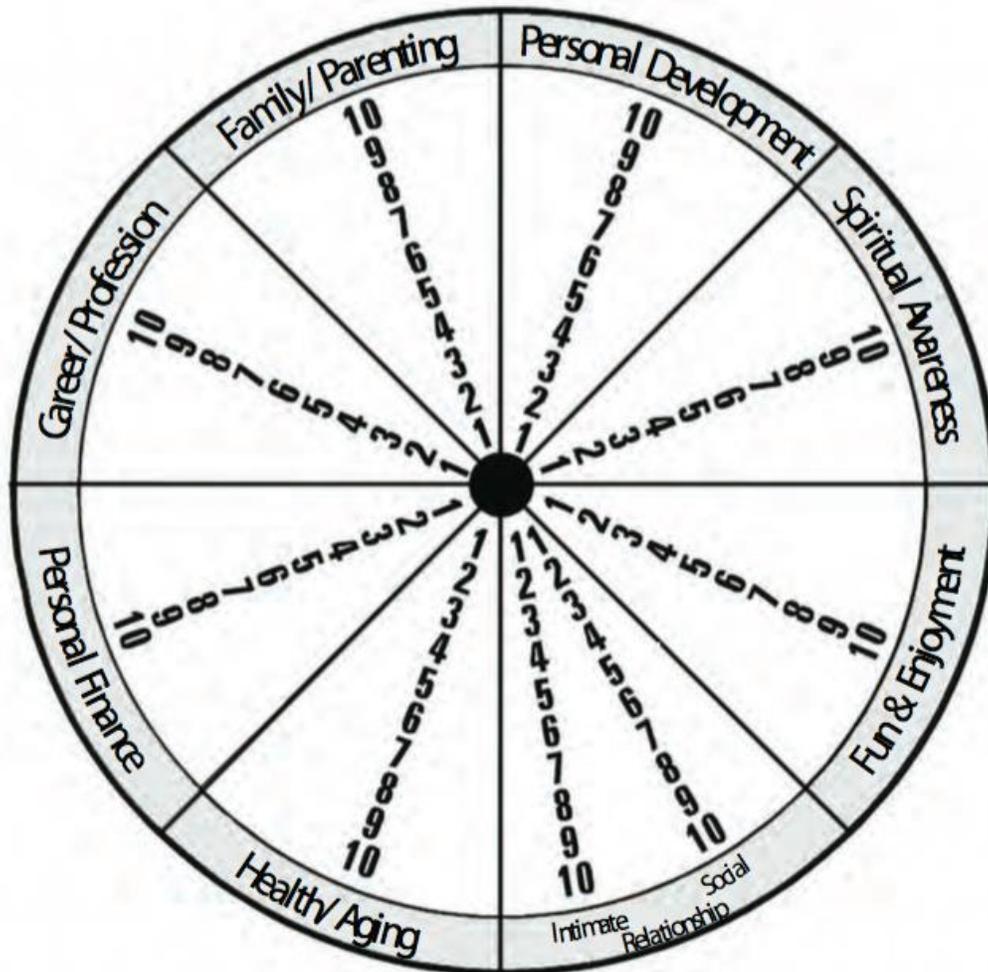
Post this on a mirror, a refrigerator, in your car, or on your desk/computer at work to remind yourself daily of these intentions and goals.

SELF-EVALUATION

Use these questions to evaluate how you're doing in your efforts toward better self-care. If you aren't progressing the way you would like, consider adding to your support and accountability sources.

- 1) On a scale of 1-10, how well have you followed your transition plan?
- 2) If your answer above was a lower number than you would like, what are 3 things you could do TODAY to help you move forward?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- 3) Use the Wheel of Life exercise on the next page to assess where you may be out of balance:

Wheel of Life



Circle the numbers that represent how you're doing in each particular area of your life. Then think about how you want to be doing in each area and, if there is a gap between where you are and where you want to be, decide if that gap is a priority for you to change.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

Explore any possible resources your organization or others in your area may have. Here are a few articles, websites, and (if applicable) resources available in your area:

Websites:

- The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project – www.compassionfatigue.org
- The American Institute of Stress – www.stress.org

Articles:

- Job Burnout: How to Spot It and Take Action – <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>
- Overcoming Compassion Fatigue – <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2000/0400/p39.html>
- Compassion Fatigue – <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/somatic-psychology/201207/compassion-fatigue>

Counseling:

- www.psychologytoday.com – Click on “Find a Therapist” at the top of the home page.

Coaching:

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