

Compassion Fatigue: Caring for Self, Body and Soul

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When a loved one falls ill or is injured we naturally reach out to provide them with nurturance and caring. We are usually unselfish when it comes to meeting the needs of family and friends who find themselves in poor health or sudden illness. Yet when we ourselves experience a change in our health we often find it difficult to compromise with ourselves or provide our mind or body with the support we so freely give to others. It is important that we as "caregivers" to ourselves learn to be aware of signs of chronic strain and stress and know when to "give to ourselves" that which we provide to others.

The first step in taking care of ourselves is to recognize warning signs. Before we reach "burnout" one can usually see "compassion fatigue". Compassion fatigue and burnout are different stages or points along a continuum. Compassion fatigue occurs before burnout sets in. It is a psychological and emotional state in which the person feels depleted, numb, and exhausted. But, unlike normal fatigue, which is alleviated by rest, this state is chronic. The person has no energy for relating to friends and family and finds it difficult to be emotionally available to others. Other signs may be cynicism, anger, hostility, and irritability. Left unattended, compassion fatigue can lead to deeper problems of burnout or clinical depression, which are more difficult to remedy.

The difficulty is that we often feel guilty when we let go of our concern about others and take time to relax and replenish ourselves. Our belief system and how we were raised often has encouraged focusing exclusively on others. Learning to listen to ourselves and understand the positive side of "selfishness" or "self-love" is critical to one's preservation and sense of well-being. The image of the solitary "pioneer" who never needed assistance from others must be viewed for what it is, a myth that only taxes and finally overwhelms the ordinary person, you and I. Taking an active role in your healthcare requires that you come to understand your needs and what is necessary for you to cope with changes thrust on you by medication schedules, dialysis, or hospitalizations.

In my clinical experience as a psychologist in medicine I have found that most people know what they need to do to nurture themselves but that they feel like they must take care of everyone else first. The problem with this approach is similar to being last in the food line at a picnic, you get what's left (usually not much or not what you want). It is not that one wants to be first in the serving line all the time but you certainly by the same token don't want to be last in line everytime. Promote yourself to the front of the line or perhaps second or third and speak out for what you need to those around you. Assertiveness is not aggressive and one can show respect and still offer a different opinion as to what decisions are made in meeting needs.

Taking care of yourself in order to avoid compassion fatigue and burnout does not have to call for massive change or new responsibilities in your daily life, merely a commitment to listen to yourself and take advantage of opportunities. The following practical steps can help in reducing stress and attending to needs we all have.

- *Make your environment you are in everyday comfortable and pleasant by using pictures, plants, and music. Think about what you enjoy in your world and find creative ways to alter your "lifespace" to merge with your personality;
- *Set aside 15 minutes (or heaven forbid, 30 minutes!) for private time, admiring nature, walking, swimming, biking, or reading a favorite novel. Taking time out consistently everyday is more important than the amount of time. Make a commitment to yourself to pamper yourself in a special way each day. A long bath or shower, a new pillow, that new music tape are keys to enjoyment;
- *Use at least part of every weekend for enjoyable activities that are replenishing. Don't isolate yourself in a room, open the window and go visit a friend;
- *Exercise daily, for 10-30 minutes. Even a brisk walk around the block can provide a dramatic break and give refreshment to the spirit;
- *Listen to a favorite musician, and try unfamiliar music that may be interesting

Caring for others requires intense, consistent commitment. Give yourself the same type of love and support. Taking care of yourself ensures that you will be available to provide the care that others need. See yourself and your needs in the proper light. Talk to your family and friends and seek counsel about how you can be given time for yourself. Don't be afraid to acknowledge your limits and be assertive with those around you in gaining the support you need.