



# Compassion Fatigue

---

Regina W. Romeo

Chief Human Resources Officer

February 17, 2021



## Agenda

---

- Define compassion fatigue and how it is different from exhaustion or burn out
- Understand secondary trauma and how it affects HR specifically
- Discuss coping strategies and ways to combat compassion fatigue





Quarantine

Home School

Election

Mental Health

Pandemic

Child Care

Protests

Masks

Vaccine

Remote Work





.....

# Mental Health Statistics

- In any given year, 1 in 5 employed adults in the U.S. experiences a mental health issue, including depression, anxiety, and insomnia
- Only 57% of employees who report moderate depression and 40% of those who report severe depression receive treatment to control depression symptoms.



# Mental Health Statistics

- Mental health issues can be present without visible symptoms
- You are more likely to experience mental illness than you are to develop heart disease, diabetes, or any kind of cancer



# Mental Health Statistics

- You don't have to have a pre-existing condition
- You can experience the onset of a new condition
- Quarantine can exacerbate an existing condition



# What is Compassion Fatigue?





# Compassion Fatigue



- Terminology used in the healthcare industry and the animal care industry.
- Associated trauma in the medical field dealing with patients in emergency, long term or hospice care
- Associated trauma in the animal care field dealing with euthanasia, cruelty, hoarding, attacks and emergencies



# Compassion Fatigue



- Large body of work associated with medical and animal care
- New parallels with human resources profession

---

# Compassion Fatigue

---

Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.

Dr. Charles Figley



## Compassion Fatigue

### Secondary Traumatic Stress

Certain circumstances can cause you to be more susceptible to secondary traumatic stress:

- Personal exposure to a traumatic event(s) or to individuals who are coping with their own reactions to trauma
- Direct contact with...traumatic stories
- Helping others and neglecting yourself

<https://traumaawareschools.org/secondaryStress>



## Compassion Fatigue

We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren't sick, but we aren't ourselves.

Dr. Charles Figley

# Compassion Fatigue

“The cost of caring”

Dr. Charles Figley



# Compassion Fatigue

The fundamental trap that causes compassion fatigue is a focus on other people and their needs before focusing on your own self-care needs. It's easy to forgo the activities that bring you happiness...without capacity flowing back in, eventually you run yourself ragged, identifying too closely with those suffering, and have nothing left to give. This is the point where compassion fatigue sets in.

-Terri Bogue



# Compassion Fatigue



- Redefining organizational care
- HR deals with employees that are literally dealing with life and death situations, domestic violence, workplace violence, health issues and a long list of other challenges.

# Compassion Fatigue



- All of these situations are in addition to the daily operational tasks
- Constant empathy and sympathy have a cumulative effect



Isn't This Just Burnout?

- Burnout
- Slower onset
- Over a prolonged period of time
- Not necessarily trauma related
- Feeling like you're not getting the job done





Isn't This Just Burnout?

## Compassion Fatigue

- More immediate onset
- Triggering events
- Ability to care is taxed to depletion - overwhelmed
- Dealing with secondary trauma
- Constant emotional availability

# Compassion Fatigue and Burnout



- Emotional exhaustion, negativity and irritation
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work
- Decreased interactions with others (isolation)
- Depersonalization (symptoms disconnected from real causes)
- Physical or mental exhaustion



Doesn't Every Manager Get  
This?

- A manager is only responsible for direct reports
- HR is responsible for an entire organization – caregivers, first responders/front line workers, resource for all including candidates and former employees
- Referrals come to HR for solution





# Coping Strategies



# How to Combat Compassion Fatigue

- ❖ Awareness
- ❖ Setting Boundaries
- ❖ Creating a Support System
- ❖ Self-Care



Awareness





## Awareness

- What types of situations contribute to your stress level increasing your vulnerability to compassion fatigue?
- *Think of events or situations that cause you to experience an unusually strong reaction and often overpowers your usual coping mechanisms*





## Awareness

- Ability to function is interfered with or altered
- Situation or incident does not seem “typical or ordinary”, it feels traumatic
- Regularly waking up tired in the morning and struggling to get to work



## Awareness

- Becoming frustrated/irritated easily
- Feeling as if you are working harder but accomplishing less
- Losing compassion for some people while becoming overly involved in others
- Experiencing illness, aches and pains



# Setting Boundaries



## Setting Boundaries

Setting emotional boundaries helps maintain a connection while still remembering and honoring the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs. (Good Therapy)





## Setting Boundaries

- Boundaries are limits people set in order to create a healthy sense of personal space
- Boundaries can be physical or emotional in nature, and they help distinguish the desires, needs, and preferences of one person from another
- Identify behaviors from others that are acceptable and unacceptable



## Setting Boundaries

- Setting a boundary doesn't mean someone will respect it
- Boundaries should be communicated assertively and openly and repeated as needed
- Changes throughout your career

A diverse group of seven business professionals, including men and women of various ethnicities, are smiling and looking towards the camera in an office environment with large windows in the background. The text "Create a Support System" is overlaid in white on a semi-transparent dark grey background.

Create a Support System



## Support System

- Be your own advocate first; Who cares for the caregivers?
- Acknowledge the emotional toll of our role in the organization
- Allow “post action” time to decompress
- Ask for help and resources you need





## Support System

- Reach out through online networks and groups
- Talk through your stressors with your peers, friends or family
- Have regular check ins and conversations with your leadership team
- Stay realistic about what you can and can't do
- Delegate



Self-Care



## Self-Care

When you overuse your compassion without taking time to regularly recharge, the ability to feel and care for others becomes worn down



## Self-Care

- Self-care is different for everyone
- Self-care should be done daily
- Do not try to do “supply side” self care
- Avoid “Pandemic Performance Pressure”
- Nurture yourself by putting activities in your schedule that are sources of pleasure, joy and diversion





## Self-Care

### Avoid

- Ignoring signs of stress, fatigue or burnout
- Working harder and longer
- Self-medicating
- Neglecting your own needs and interests
- Feeling shame or guilt for resting



## Self-Care

### Embrace

- A time every day for a self care routine
- Celebrating small wins (Dishwasher Standard)
- Doing something *meditative*
- Redefining rest and recovery
- Getting professional assistance





































GO BIG OR  
GO HOME!









## Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction is the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work





Wonder  
Woman



#1 Fan





# Fighting for Your Rights



# In Her Satin Tights





Sometimes  
She's Diana  
Prince



Questions?



# Resources

<https://extinguishburnout.com/2019/08/19/is-it-compassion-fatigue-or-burnout/>

<https://www.stress.org/military/for-practitionersleaders/compassion-fatigue>

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/for-professionals/business-management/human-resources/article/cost-of-caring-10-ways-to-prevent-compassion-fatigue>

[https://proqol.org/Compassion\\_Satisfaction.html#:~:text=Compassion%20satisfaction%20is%20about%20the,what%20you%20do%20at%20work](https://proqol.org/Compassion_Satisfaction.html#:~:text=Compassion%20satisfaction%20is%20about%20the,what%20you%20do%20at%20work)

<https://traumaawareschools.org/secondaryStress>