

### **Are You Suffering from Compassion Fatigue?**

*Presented by David M. Weidmayer, CFP®*

Whether you are in the “sandwich generation,” taking care of aging parents while raising your own children, or you are caring for others in some manner, it can be a balancing act. And it’s one that can take its toll on your emotional well-being. In other words, you may be suffering from compassion fatigue.

Often seen in the caregiving professions, compassion fatigue is the burnout that results from the stressors of your external environment. Perhaps you’re working full-time while trying to shuttle family members to after-school activities and medical appointments. Maybe you can’t sleep because you’re worried about having the money to pay your parents’ health care bills *and* your kids’ college tuition. Add to that the current COVID-19 crisis, and you may have even reached the point where you just can’t take it anymore. Sound familiar?

If so, you may be feeling the effects of the traumatic stress known as compassion fatigue. Here, we’ll identify the warning signs, as well as discuss strategies for navigating through difficult times while maintaining your own mental health.

#### **Beware the Signs of Compassion Fatigue**

You may not think of yourself as a “professional” caregiver. But if you’re shouldering the legal, health care, and/or financial concerns of a loved one, you’ve taken on a lot of responsibility—and the stress that comes with it. As such, it’s important to develop a heightened awareness of the signs of compassion fatigue. These may include the following:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia
- Physical and mental fatigue
- Burying your emotions
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Frequent complaining about your work or your life
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol
- Overeating
- Poor self-care
- Denial

According to the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#), “denial is one of the most detrimental symptoms.” It prohibits those experiencing compassion fatigue to accurately evaluate how stressed they actually are, which can be a roadblock to getting the help they need.

## **Put Your Stress to the Test**

If these signs sound all too familiar, you may want to rate yourself on the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Scale. The ProQOL measure (available at [https://proqol.org/ProQol\\_Test.html](https://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html)) is a free tool designed for those who help others as part of their daily lives. It measures both the negative aspects of helping others (compassion fatigue) and the positive aspects of those responsibilities (compassion satisfaction).

To take the assessment, simply rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = never and 5 = very often) based on how you've felt in the past 30 days. Some of the statements include: "I am proud of what I can do to [help]," "I feel worn out because of my work as a [helper]," and "I feel as though I am experiencing the trauma of someone I have [helped]." After rating each statement, you will receive a personal score; based on that score, you will fall into one of three categories: compassion satisfaction, burnout, or secondary traumatic stress. (You can learn more about these categories by visiting [proqol.org](https://proqol.org).)

Once you know the signs or have identified that this might be an issue for you, how do you manage it? Fortunately, there are resources and strategies to help.

## **Fight the Fatigue**

If you recognize the symptoms of compassion fatigue, educating yourself is a good starting point. One go-to resource is the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (available at [compassionfatigue.org](https://compassionfatigue.org)), founded by Patricia Smith, a certified compassion fatigue specialist with more than 20 years of training experience. The site provides in-depth information, book recommendations, and presentations so caregivers can begin to help themselves. The resources available here can help raise awareness and perhaps help you feel less alone in what you may be experiencing.

There are also some proven techniques that can help you work through the symptoms of compassion fatigue. Many of them focus on finding the time in your day for you and being kind to yourself.

- **Diet and exercise.** Take care of yourself by eating well and exercising, even if it's just a walk to begin or end your day.
- **Hobbies and leisure activities.** Find something you enjoy—and spend time doing it.
- **Accountability partner.** Ask someone you trust to partner with you on the commitments you make to self-care. In turn, you can be that individual's accountability partner and provide the ongoing support he or she needs.
- **Gratitude.** Take the opportunity to reflect on the things you are thankful for. For some, this practice can be as simple as writing down three things they are grateful for each day.
- **Success stories.** Identify one success story every day (did you go to the gym or knock off a lingering house project?), and be sure to celebrate it!
- **Verbal expression.** By letting others know what you need verbally, it will be easier for them to deliver on your expectations.
- **Personal boundaries.** Share with others what works for you and what doesn't.

This last point on boundaries deserves a bit more discussion. Setting boundaries can be hard, but it will help you conserve your resources and energy, as well as protect yourself from feelings of resentment, anger, and fatigue. The best way to determine your personal boundaries is to assess your needs. For example, how much alone time do you require daily to renew yourself? How much support do you need to care for your loved ones? Once you have a clear view of your boundaries, [create a plan](#) that allows you to care for others with gentleness and patience.

### **Take Care of Yourself, Too**

There's no doubt that caregiving is important and rewarding. After all, there is honor in helping others, for being there to support them in difficult times. It's important to recognize, however, that there are limits to how much you can give—because caring for others shouldn't hurt you.

If you think you may be suffering from compassion fatigue, I encourage you to try out some of the techniques discussed here. They will help you continue to provide the best care for your loved ones while taking care of yourself, too.

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