

## compassion fatigue

By Heather Pollett, B.A., M.A.  
Policy and Program Analyst  
CMHA-NL

The beginning of May is set aside every year by the Canadian Mental Health Association to honour national Mental Health Week. This year's theme is "Mental Health For All," highlighting the importance of everyone enjoying good mental health. Unfortunately, many of us are so concerned with the well-being of others that we are unable to fully appreciate the toll that care takes on ourselves.

Compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress disorder, is a mental health issue that results from the cumulative, chronic emotional and physical stress of helping or caring for others without being able to adequately rest, refuel and regenerate. It is characterized by apathy towards others and an inability to feel compassion, but there are many other physical, emotional and behavioural signs and symptoms (see sidebar). And it can manifest itself at the organizational level, resulting in higher rates of workers leaving the field and employee turnover, bullying and toxic workplaces.

While compassion fatigue can affect people from a variety of backgrounds, those working in helping and health-care professions such as social work and nursing are at high risk, as are others who work in crisis or trauma-related fields. Workers in voluntary organizations who provide social or health services, and those in caregiving

### Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- withdrawing and isolating from others
- anger and irritability
- compromised care for patients/clients or loved ones
- poor self-care and hygiene
- a pervasive negative attitude, cynicism
- negative self-image
- loss of hope
- problems in personal relationships
- depression and anxiety
- exhaustion
- insomnia
- headaches
- increased susceptibility to illness

*Canadian Mental Health Association, Newfoundland and Labrador Division (CMHA-NL), is a non-profit, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all, and supports the resilience and recovery of persons with mental illness.*

positions in settings such as long-term care or home support for persons with disabilities can also be affected. Sufferers may also include unpaid family caregivers who devote themselves to helping their loved ones, such as an ill spouse, child and/or elderly parents.

While there are many joys and rewards that come from working, paid or unpaid, in a caregiving or helping role, there are many challenges that are unaddressed. Compassion fatigue is a normal response to chronic stress, and many people suffer due to a lack of awareness about this common issue, believing it to be related to personal weakness or unsuitability for the role. In reality, research shows that compassion fatigue tends to affect the most caring people, but the guilt and shame associated with experiencing these feelings can leave people suffering in silence.

There are many factors that can contribute to compassion fatigue. One's personal coping skills, personality and level of social support are factors, but organizational conditions, social attitudes and unrealistic expectations can also play a role in the development of compassion fatigue. Above the challenging nature of the helping work itself, factors in the workplace such as working conditions, lack of training, work overload, and a general lack of policies that promote healthy, respectful workplaces and work-life balance can contribute to compassion fatigue. In a broader societal sense, the general lack of regard for the needs of both socially marginalized persons (such as those who have been victimized, have illnesses and disabilities, and seniors) and their helpers/caregivers can create barriers not only to understanding their issues, but also to providing help to them effectively.

## Self-Care Tips for Sufferers

Get plenty of sleep, rest and exercise, and eat a healthy diet when you can

Practise self-awareness and monitor stress levels regularly

Seek out respite supports where available

Reach out to friends and family, connect with colleagues, or find a caregivers' group or network

Spend time around people whose company you enjoy

Meditate or pray, and find ways to maintain your spiritual connection

Find opportunities to laugh each day

Allow yourself to cry

Strive for work-life balance

Learn how to say "no" and set limits that work for you

Compassion fatigue is a normal response to cumulative stress, but it can take a serious toll on helpers. Focusing on one's own wellness and reducing stress can help build resilience and reduce the impact of compassion fatigue (see sidebar for self-help tips). If you are a friend, partner, family member or coworker of a person who may be dealing with compassion fatigue, ask them how you can support them. If you are experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue and feel that you may need help beyond basic self-care, talk to your family doctor or a mental health professional in your community. 📞

*On May 3, CMHA-NL is holding its first compassion fatigue workshop in the province to educate helpers on building their own resilience. For more information on this workshop or on compassion fatigue-related resources, visit [DownhomeLife.com](http://DownhomeLife.com) and click on "May Hot Links."*