

Compassion Fatigue

As a student leader, you care. You care about your peers. You care about your college community. You care about making a difference. You care about the projects you complete. You care about the reputation of the campus department or group you represent.

The student who disclosed to you that she was sexually assaulted at a party last week weighs heavily on your mind. The organizational member who shared she is struggling with tuition payments keeps you thinking. The student who asked you for help determining how to approach a friend she thinks is being hazed keeps you on edge.

So, where do you draw the line? What impact do all of these issues actually have on your emotional, physical, and spiritual self? Perhaps they are having more of an impact than you think.

What Exactly is Compassion Fatigue?

Much of the research done on compassion fatigue (CF) focuses on caregivers; those people taking care of elderly parents, counselors working with troubled clients, and others. Some of the professionals most at risk for CF include medical professionals, human service workers, counselors, mental health professionals, advocates, emergency care workers, and the clergy.

Just take a look at that list. As a student leader, you may have served one or more of the functions listed there within the past month, wouldn't you say?

Compassion Fatigue (CF) is a syndrome consisting of various symptoms that mirror Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a disorder that affects people who have experienced extreme traumatic or violent events in their lives such as severe car accidents, plane crashes, natural disasters, or abuse. People who develop PTSD report episodes of fear, depression, confusion, and hopelessness.

While those who experience CF have not necessarily been direct victims of trauma, as the "helper" they



...that it is okay to put yourself first sometimes. We sometimes feel guilty putting ourselves first.

But, in reality, if we don't take care of ourselves, how can we care for others? Consider posting the following question (adapted from a quote by an unknown source) to affirm that caring for yourself is most important:

"If you don't take care of your body, where else are you going to live?"

still experience an impact on their personal cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, interpersonal, and physical functioning. This is sometimes referred to as "secondary trauma."

Signs & Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

As a student leader, you often take on the problems of others, from the teammate who has a conflict with your advisor to a friend who is dealing with his parents' divorce. Yet, you can't solve these things all on your own—and you may harm yourself in the process. Compassion fatigue may kick in, with symptoms that include:

- An overused sense of compassion that leads to a lack of ability to feel or to care for others
- An accumulated fatigue that can take months or years to surface
- Re-experiencing the trauma of a situation or a student's experience, even after the incident is over
- Avoiding any reminders of an event or numbing yourself to it
- Losing your sense of self to the students you serve—getting so wrapped up in their issues that you leave yourself behind

Get help if you've reached this point.

Compassion Fatigue (continued)

Strategies for Preventing Compassion Fatigue

- maintaining a balanced lifestyle that includes boundaries and limit setting
- getting support and help when you need it
- having plans in place for coping with tough issues and incidents
- getting adequate professional training
- taking stock of your own healing and letting yourself experience the necessary spectrum of emotions
- replenishing yourself
- nurturing social relationships outside of work
- getting involved in a positive initiative
- maintaining proper sleep, nutrition, and fitness habits
- connecting with nature
- expressing yourself creatively
- meditating or engaging in spiritual practice
- being honest with yourself about your strengths and limitations
- maintaining a sense of humor—even during difficult and stressful times
- working in a positive, supportive, and team-oriented environment

Reflection Section

You have lots of students and a campus community to think about and care for. However, it is important not to forget about taking care of yourself! What have you done to treat YOURSELF lately?

Do you discuss your own personal well-being with your supervisor or advisor? Do you ask for help when you need it, or are you afraid that she expects you to be “the perfect student leader” at all times?

What outlets do you have? Who provides support?

What Can I Do if I Am Experiencing CF?

- cut out negative addictions or numbing agents such as alcohol, other drugs, caffeine, and nicotine
- get enough sleep
- tune into your body’s nutritional and exercise needs
- develop a segment of your life where you take rather than give
- put yourself in situations where you’re able to see the positives life offers
- take some time off, or in more serious situations, switch jobs if necessary

What can you be doing better in your life to prevent experiencing compassion fatigue?

How are you going to go about making these changes?

CF Self-Tests

In order to see if you may be experiencing CF, check out the following self-tests available on the web. Please keep in mind, however, that these instruments should in no way replace the advice of medical and counseling professionals who can best help.

- The CF Self-Test from ACE at www.ace-network.com/cftest.htm is an instrument under development from the Florida State University Psychosocial Stress Research Program
- The Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue (CSF) Test at www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/tests/satfat.htm may be freely copied based on conditions listed at the site.