

Compassion Fatigue

Time to care for our caregivers.

This is a message to all Employers, colleagues, friends and family members of Keyworkers and Care workers.

Cause

Compassion fatigue – it's a risk if you work in any capacity where you are consistently exposed to high, unusual and continued levels of stress and trauma, and part of your role is to provide care, empathy, concern, and understanding.

The reality is, we have a limit to emotional resilience. There is only so much we can sustain being caring and compassionate, whilst under constant exposure to trauma and extreme pressure, with no or limited respite.

People that make the choice to work in such environments are at risk, and their limits can be missed, as we naturally expect our **Heroes** to get on with the job, be amazing and know how to cope.

If your colleague or staff member starts to present as not performing to their usual best, are making mistakes, having mood and behavioural issues, being critical is not safe, appropriate or supportive.

With everything they will have been through with Covid-19, this is the time to offer help and understanding. If prior to this crisis your friend or colleague was not showing any of the below signs and these are actions you would not previously have associated them with, there is a good possibility they are suffering from **Compassion Fatigue**.

Symptoms & Signs

These are some of the key indicators to be aware of:-

- Becoming detached or isolating from others.
- Lack of empathy and showing intolerance.
- Difficulty in concentrating or presenting as preoccupied.
- Receiving unusual amount of complaints / concerns about their work and behaviour.
- Substance misuse and / or risky behaviours (to avoid thoughts and feelings) i.e. drug abuse, gambling, drinking too much, over eating, over spending.....
- Diminished self-care i.e. appearance/ personal hygiene.
- Withholding emotions.

- Reoccurring nightmares and flashbacks.
- Physical illness related to stress, often chronic such as stomach or inflammatory problems, headaches, regularly run down, getting colds etc.
- Low in mood, sad, apathetic, and experiencing anhedonia.
- Feeling a failure / de-skilled and losing professional confidence (they may not verbalise this and it may manifest as avoidance, irritation or upset).
- Angry, agitated, blaming self.
- Mentally and physically tired.
- Resistant to acknowledging there is an issue, even denial, as care givers often feel they have to be strong and dependable all the time.

Support

Recognising the signs is the first step to healing.

This may manifest even months after the crisis so keep vigilant for the symptoms.

Here is what to do:

- ◇ Be patient and kind, let them know you are concerned and that you care (no blame!).
- ◇ If possible, re-designate some of their work load temporarily – respite from continuing to be ‘*exposed*’ to care is paramount.
- ◇ Normalise their feelings (don’t patronise!).
- ◇ If possible, allow time off, and plan the following actions, even if they cannot take any full leave of absence.
- ◇ Ensure there is support in place, whether that is supervision, a secure non-judgmental space to talk, and offering counselling support or occupational health (if you have an EAP service use it).
- ◇ Encourage them to talk to someone – colleague, therapist, friends, Compassion Fatigue support groups.
- ◇ Acceptance – Compassion fatigue is experienced by people who are naturally and vocationally caring , therefore it is extremely distressing to experience the above symptoms , as they fear they don’t know who they are any more.

Encourage /suggest the following:-

- ◇ Take some moments for self-care - time off, exercise , getting back to recreational activities/hobbies (with anhedonia be prepared not to feel any better at first – but trust that feeling of pleasure will come back ,just stick with it). Schedule in time for this, don’t just wing it.
- ◇ Spend time with family or friends – learn to reconnect (again this may not feel natural at first, that’s to be expected).
- ◇ Exercise - not just the usual fitness, but walking, dancing, gardening .anything that gets you moving.

◇ Practice relaxation and Mindfulness techniques.

◇ Writing a feelings and daily journal, learn to explore and not hold onto negative and self-punishing emotions and thoughts.

◇ Learn to find fun again, it may take time, laughter is healing and helps reconnect with others.

Be proud that you were that person working in such extreme conditions and you are now allowed to have time to heal and repair - you have earned it.

To quote Viktor Frankl (Austrian psychiatrist and psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor).

“But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer.”

Thank you each and every one of you, for what you have done and are yet to do.

Dee Johnson @Mindsoutherapy

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