**Combating Compassion Fatigue**

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is common among caregivers who spend a significant amount of time working with the seriously ill and traumatized. Compassion fatigue shares many of the same symptoms with burnout, another common issue among caregivers, but burnout, generally indicates a loss of the ability to empathize. Victims of compassion fatigue are overwhelmed by their emotional connection with and compassion for those they aid, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Long-term, untreated compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and other serious stress-related conditions. That’s why it’s important to recognize, address and treat the causes and symptoms immediately by taking care of your physical and emotional health.

**Who is at risk?**

Physicians, caregivers and volunteers who help others often are extremely empathic people, and their generous and caring nature may heighten their vulnerability to compassion fatigue. People may be especially vulnerable if they have experienced unresolved trauma in their own lives or are going through an emotional or traumatic event at the same time as the people they are treating.

Compassion fatigue can happen slowly over time, or it can come on suddenly, the U.S. Department of Defense advises on its Military OneSource site for service members, veterans and their families. The signs are similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder but can vary greatly among individuals:

- **Nervousness and anxiety:** You may feel fearful about going out or be hyper-vigilant about your own and your family’s safety.
- **Anger and irritability:** You may argue with relatives, friends or co-workers or feel angry for no discernable reason.
- **Mood swings:** Compassion fatigue can make it difficult for you to control your emotions. You may feel fine one minute and then find yourself suddenly crying or feeling very anxious the next.
- **Difficulty concentrating:** Maintaining focus or making even simple decisions may be signs of compassion fatigue. You may forget parts of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.
- **Changes in appetite, sleep or other habits:** You may be eating more or less than usual, or may be sleeping too much or not enough. You also may withdraw from others by becoming emotionally distant and detached.
- **Physical changes:** People suffering from compassion fatigue may experience headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, heart palpitations or shortness of breath. You may notice flu-like or cold symptoms. (If you do have any of these physical changes, see your health care provider to rule out a medical ailment.)
- **Depression:** Feeling sadness and grief, lowered self-esteem or a loss of interest in ordinary activities, memory difficulties, extreme fatigue or frequent crying episodes also are possible signs of compassion fatigue.

Other symptoms cited by mental health professionals include:

- Isolation from others
- Complaints from co-workers or supervisors about work performance
- Substance abuse
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling and sexual addictions
- Poor self-care, including lack of hygiene and unkempt appearance
- Legal problems or indebtedness
- Nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic events
- Difficulty separating work from personal life
- Lack of connection with co-workers and others on the job
Addressing Compassion Fatigue

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, which works to educate healthcare professionals about the issue, such symptoms are normal displays of stress resulting from the work of caregiving. The good news is that, “While the symptoms are often disruptive, depressive, and irritating, an awareness of the symptoms and their negative effect on your life can lead to positive change, personal transformation, and a new resiliency,” the project suggests on its website.

Here are some tips from the project to address compassion fatigue:

- Be kind to yourself.
- Be aware of what you’re experiencing and educate yourself.
- Accept where you are on your path at all times.
- Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.
- Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate what you’re experiencing.
- Listen to others who are suffering.
- Clarify your personal boundaries: What works for you; what doesn’t.
- Express your needs verbally.
- Take positive action to change your environment.

Untreated compassion fatigue can impair your health as well as your work performance. It also can negatively impact your personal and family life. That’s why it’s important to get help promptly if you feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities. Be aware that help is available for the helper and that you are as important as the people you are helping. Some additional tips from the Military OneSource website:

**Talk with someone you trust:** Just voicing your feelings and fears can help you feel more in control and less alone. A supervisor, mentor or trusted colleague can remind you of what’s typical and can help you anticipate challenges that may lie ahead.

**Take care of yourself:** Eat well-balanced meals, get enough sleep and make time to exercise, even if you only take a few minutes for a short walk. Practice deep breathing and other relaxation techniques. Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to help you manage your emotions.

**Give yourself time:** Compassion fatigue isn’t a sign of weakness. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient with you. Telling people how they can help will make you feel useful and help you get the support you need.

**Know your own limits:** You may need to stop or change your assignment, even if it’s only temporarily. You can’t be effective if you’re exhausted or know you can’t help. Take time for a well-deserved break. When you return, you may be better able to help others because you have a refreshed attitude, more energy and a different perspective.

**Focus on the good you are doing:** You are giving the gift of yourself and your experience and training.

If you ever feel overwhelmed, talk with a professional who can suggest ways to help others without neglecting your own needs. Your Employee Assistance Program can aid you in finding the counselling and other resources you need to get back to feeling yourself again.

Unrecognized and untreated compassion fatigue causes people to leave their profession, fall into the throws of addictions or in extreme cases become self-destructive or suicidal, warns Angelea Panos, a therapist and board member of Gift From Within, a nonprofit organization for survivors of trauma and victimization. “It is important that we all understand this phenomenon for our own well-being, but also for our colleagues,” she writes on the Gift From Within website. “If you notice a colleague in distress, reach out to them... and let them know you care and are available to talk if they need.”

**Resources**

- Gift From Within: www.giftfromwithin.org
- Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: www.compassionfatigue.org
- Military OneSource: www.militaryonesource.mil
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.
Addressing Moral Distress and Stress

When we feel pressure at work to act in ways that conflict with our personal or professional values, the result can be moral distress. This distress is especially prevalent in health care, where life-and-death decisions, ethical dilemmas and highly charged interactions are the norm rather than the exception. It’s important for clinicians, especially those in emergency and critical care, to be aware of the sources of moral distress and its effects, and to arm themselves with strategies to prevent such situations from threatening their health and their careers.

Sources of Moral Distress

Research identifies several common sources of moral distress, according to the Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, including:

- Continued life support that’s not in the patient’s best interest
- Inadequate communication about end-of-life care between providers and patients and families
- Inappropriate use of health care resources
- Inadequate staffing or staff not adequately trained to provide care
- Inadequate pain relief for patients
- False hope given to patients and families

Dangers of Moral Distress

Moral distress is regularly identified as a major stressor for health care professionals who may feel powerless to speak up about ethical conflicts, let alone take action to resolve them. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) warns that allowing such conflicts to continue unaddressed can have dire effects on nurses’ health and well-being, their professional development and advancement, and the practice of health care in general.

In the workplace, moral distress can mean:

- Poor communication
- Lack of trust
- High turnover rates
- Defensiveness and lack of collaboration across disciplines

For caregivers, the results can be:

- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Frustration, anger and burnout
- Feeling belittled, unimportant, and even isolated because others don’t appear to recognize the same ethical conflicts
- Avoidance of patient contact
- Loss of empathy
- Poor performance reviews
- Leaving the profession entirely

Taking on Moral Distress

The AACN offers a toolkit (www.aacn.org/wd/practice/docs/4as_to_rise_above_moral_distress.pdf) called the 4As to Rise Above Moral Distress, the kit offers clear steps—ASK, AFFIRM, ASSESS, ACT—for addressing the issue.

ASK: You may be unaware of the exact nature of the problem but are feeling distress. The goal of this stage is to clarify whether moral distress is present and, if so, identify the cause.

AFFIRM: Affirm your distress and professional obligation to act. Validate your feelings and perceptions with others then commit to taking action.
**GuidanceResources**

**ASSESS:** Identify the sources and the severity of the distress. Determine whether you are ready to act and, if so, form a plan of action.

**ACT:** Prepare personally and professionally to take action, whether individually or through a committee, nursing council or similar body. Implement strategies to initiate the needed changes. Anticipate and manage setbacks. Maintain the improvements.

**Further Strategies**
The following chart from the Online Journal of Issues in Nursing offers a synopsis of other strategies identified by nurse educators for reducing moral distress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speak up</td>
<td>Identify the problem, gather the facts and voice your opinion.</td>
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<td>Be deliberate</td>
<td>Know who you need to speak with and know what you need to speak about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be accountable</td>
<td>Sometimes our actions are not quite right. Be ready to accept the consequences, should things not turn out the way you had planned.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build support networks</td>
<td>Find colleagues who support you or who support acting to address moral distress. Speak with one authoritative voice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on changes in the work environment</td>
<td>Focusing on the work environment will be more productive than focusing on an individual patient. Remember, similar problems tend to occur over and over. It’s not usually the patient, but the system, that needs changing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participate in moral distress education</td>
<td>Attend forums and discussions about moral distress. Learn all you can about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Many causes of moral distress are interdisciplinary. Nursing alone cannot change the work environment. Multiple views and collaboration are needed to improve a system, especially a complex one such as a hospital unit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Find root causes</td>
<td>What are the common causes of moral distress in your unit? Target those.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop policies</td>
<td>Develop policies to encourage open discussion, interdisciplinary collaboration and the initiation of ethics consultations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design a workshop</td>
<td>Train nursing staff to recognize moral distress, identify barriers to change and create a plan for action.</td>
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**Your Employee Assistance Program Can Help**
Nursing leaders warn that some moral distress is probably inevitable in the health care workplace. That doesn’t make dealing with the conflict, stress and anxiety any easier. Your Employee Assistance Program can help. Call today to talk with our credentialed, caring clinicians about your personal concerns. They can work with you over the phone or refer you to a counselor or other resources in your community for further help. The service is completely confidential and available anytime, 24 hours a day, seven days a week to you and your household members.

**Resource**

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.
Resilience in Stressful Times

Keep in mind that stress doesn’t always get better on its own. You may have to actively work on it, especially if the stress you have been facing is prolonged or intense. The following stress management techniques may help:

- **Scale back:** While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can cut back on or delegate to someone else. If news reports or social media posts are contributing to your stress, try turning off the TV and the Internet until you feel better able to deal.

- **Prepare:** If you are feeling edgy already, try to stay ahead of additional stress by preparing for meetings or trips, scheduling your time better, and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. Stress mounts when you run short on time, so build a cushion into your schedule for traffic jams or slow public transportation, for example.

- **Reach out:** Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, or clergy and spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being and your ability to cope. Volunteer in your community.

- **Take up a hobby:** It may seem cliché, but an enjoyable pastime can calm your racing mind and heart rate. Try reading, gardening, crafts, tinkering with electronics, fishing, carpentry or music—things that you don’t get competitive or more stressed out about.

- **Relax:** Physical activity, meditation, yoga, massage and other relaxation techniques can help you manage stress. It doesn’t matter which technique you choose. What matters is refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body.

- **Get enough sleep:** Lack of sleep affects your immune system and your judgment and makes you more likely to snap over minor irritations. Most people need seven to eight hours a day.

- **Avoid alcohol and caffeine:** While momentarily calming, both can contribute to stress and anxiety.

- **Get professional help:** If your stress management efforts aren’t helpful enough, see your doctor or contact your Employee Assistance Program. Chronic, uncontrolled stress can lead to a variety of potentially serious health problems, including depression and pain.