

The Cost of Caring: Preventing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue amongst School Professionals

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 5 youth have a diagnosable emotional, behavioral or mental health disorder, yet 2/3 are not getting the help they need because many often go undiagnosed or untreated. Additionally, almost half the nation's children have experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma (National Survey of Children's Health). Today's classrooms are filled with youth who carry the baggage of such issues as poverty, abuse, violence, illness, divorce, death, parental incarceration, neglect and substance abuse. With the frequency and intensity of student's emotional and behavioral disorders increasing, the strain of school professionals who work so diligently to provide compassion and support to students and families can be emotionally and psychologically wearing. Our school professionals make up one of the most devoted, compassionate, caring and supportive professional sectors. Telling a teacher, counselor or school social worker to leave the needs of their students at work when they leave for the day is like telling a parent to stop loving their child. It is natural for educators to become emotionally invested in the wellbeing of the youth they care for 9 months out of the year. Self-care and recognizing the signs of burnout and compassion fatigue can help guide our school professionals in managing their own health and wellbeing.

Simply put, compassion fatigue (also called secondary traumatization) is the emotional strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Compassion fatigue differs from burn out but can co-exist. Burn-out can be defined by the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion, feelings of professional insufficiency and institutional stress. Interestingly, compassion fatigue has a faster recovery if recognized and managed early. Commonalities of burnout and compassion fatigue include: emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work, mental exhaustion, decreased interactions with others, depersonalization and physical exhaustion.

Self-awareness is a key component in managing stress and reducing the mental and physical toll of compassion fatigue and/or burnout. Understanding our own emotional triggers and behaviors can guide us in making rational decisions based on conscious choice, rather than unconscious emotional conditioning. Continuing to check in with yourself can help you better prevent and manage compassion fatigue or burnout as it arises. Additional preventative strategies include:

- **Practice Self-Care:** eat a balanced diet, engage in regular exercise, get plenty of sleep, honor your emotional needs and try to find a balance between work and leisure.
- **Set Emotional Boundaries:** it can be challenging to remain compassionate, empathetic, and supportive of others without becoming overly involved and taking on another's pain. Setting emotional boundaries helps maintain a connection while still remembering the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs.
- **Use Positive Coping Strategies:** deep breathing, taking a walk, talking with a friend, practice mindfulness.



- **Don't "Go at It Alone":** when you encounter a challenging, high stress situation, enlist the help, support and guidance of your team members and colleagues.
- **Cultivate Healthy Friendships Outside of Work:** connecting with friends who are not aware of the ins and outs of your work situation can provide much needed emotional and professional relief.
- **Know What is Yours to Do:** Separate what you wish you could do from what you know you can do. It is normal to feel like we sometimes aren't doing enough. Understanding what is in our control to do and what we may have to let go of or give to someone else is essential.

References: American Institute of Stress; National Survey of Children's Health, National Alliance of Mental Illness; The Council for Exceptional Children, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD); Counseling Today.