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Avoiding Compassion Fatigue at Work

by Heather Boerner, for Yahoo! HotJobs

If you're a teacher, [social worker](#), police officer, [nurse](#), therapist, or even a newspaper reporter -- any job where you talk to traumatized people every day -- you could be at risk for compassion fatigue. And it could be keeping you from helping others and excelling at your job.

People with compassion fatigue love their [jobs](#), but they start to feel just as traumatized as the people they serve. Symptoms include bad dreams, stomach aches, insomnia, withdrawal, and feelings of inadequacy.

"You can become so walled off (to your client's trauma) that you end up missing a lot of signs for help on the part of the people you're serving," said Charles Figley, author of "Treating Compassion Fatigue." "Or you become so overwhelmed by feelings that the people you serve begin to attend to you. Either way, you're less effective in your job."

The good news is that you don't have to quit your job to recover.

Get Aware

Pay attention to how you react to your job. Evaluate yourself with the following questions:

- Are you taking regular lunch breaks?
- Do you take breaks between clients or meetings?
- Do you give clients your private cell phone number?
- After dealing with each client or student, are you more anxious and hopeless?
- How much responsibility do you feel to solve each your clients' problems?

Get Honest

After gathering answers to the above questions, "have a heart-to-heart talk with yourself about the situation," Figley advises.

You may discover that certain parts of your job or interaction with certain types of clients drain you more than others. Take the example of a police officer, suggests Figley.

"[Police officers](#) may like getting the bad guy, or like solving mysteries," he said. "But they hate when they see kids hurt, or people in pain and suffering. The hard thing about compassion fatigue is that they put up with the things they find distressing in order to benefit from things like."

Or take the example of social workers who loves helping people but feel particularly sad, hopeless, and inadequate when they see children who are abused, says Dr. Robin Goodman, a therapist who has worked with people in trauma.?

It's not a matter of finding some clients distasteful; it's a matter of caring about certain clients -- like children or the elderly -- so much that you're left feeling overwhelmed and internalizing the grief and trauma they're experiencing.

Get Better

Now that you know the cause, take the kinds of advice you often give to people you serve:

- *Set stronger boundaries:* If you're not setting aside time for lunch or to decompress after a harrowing session with someone who's traumatized, start taking breaks. Even 10 minutes can help your nerves recover.
- *Silence the cell:* Turn off your cell phone for a few hours or all weekend to give yourself time to rest.
- *Pay attention to your breathing:* When you feel anxious, take long deep breaths with a pause after each inhale and exhale.
- *Practice positive self-talk:* Remind yourself that it's not your job to solve all of your clients' problems, but to help them recover -- and you need to do the same for yourself.
- *Exercise:* Regular workouts relieve stress and improve sleep.
- *Buddy up:* Talk to coworkers about how you feel. You'll likely find others who feel the same. Seek out a colleague who

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has felt this way and has recovered to guide you.

- *Get help:* Find an expert in treating compassion fatigue to help you better help the people you serve.

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