



Compassion Fatigue: Caregivers Cost of Caring

Strategies to help with fatigue and burnout

By Carley Greenawalt, PT, DPT

THE COMPASSION AND empathy that physical therapists and physical therapist assistants demonstrate daily with each patient can prove to be mentally, physically, and economically costly. Repeated exposure to patients' stories of pain and trauma can take a toll that often leads to compassion fatigue.

The most common definition of compassion fatigue, as described by Figley, is "a state of exhaustion and dysfunction biologically, psychologically, and socially as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress and all it invokes."¹ Compassion fatigue is often confused with burnout; however, the two terms are not interchangeable. Compassion fatigue is more acute and the result

of exposure to those suffering a traumatic event.²⁻⁴

In contrast, burnout has a gradual onset and is considered a form of depression. Burnout is a psychological syndrome that results from prolonged stressors in the workplace, such as job satisfaction and interactions/relationships with co-workers. The results of compassion fatigue in physical therapists and physical therapist assistants can be devastating and negatively affect clinicians, patients, organizations, and even society as a whole.⁵ As clinic owners and leaders, it is very important to recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue, which can surface and need to be addressed with supersonic speed.



QUICK FIX BEGINNER

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue in your employees⁶
 - Declined ability to feel empathy or sympathy
 - More task-oriented and less emotionally focused
 - Detachment and social isolation
 - Profound physical and emotional exhaustion
 - Decreased ability to connect with patients
- Encourage employees to engage in creative and personally meaningful activities to feel alive, relaxed, and well.
- Critically evaluate sources of stress and identify ways to reduce them.



QUICK FIX PRO

- Ensure all resources are available for employees to “do the job well”
- Provide learning opportunities, mentorship, and peer support for new therapists
- Host mindfulness workshops to build organizational resilience
- Offer self-compassion and compassion training, which can foster a qualitatively kinder, more benevolent workplace culture as well as compassion resilience
- Help individuals build an equanimity account by fostering positive thinking, humor, and gratitude activities, which can help guard against compassion fatigue.
 - o Equanimity can be defined as an even-minded mental state or dispositional tendency toward all experiences or objects, regardless of their origin or their affective valence (pleasant, neutral, unpleasant)⁷ **I**

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