

WELLBEING SERIES

COMPASSION FATIGUE

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1. Compassion Fatigue Ireland

Abstract

Background

In this wellbeing series we present practical advice for prehospital care providers, responders, and other shift workers. These articles are produced by experts in their field. Many of these topics were presented at the Irish College of Paramedics Wellbeing Symposium in University College Cork in May 2019.

Keywords: paramedic, wellbeing, prehospital, health.

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue is an experience of emotional/psychological fatigue people experience due to chronic use of empathy when engaging with individuals who are suffering in some way. Compassion Fatigue is a style of burnout which develops over a period of time due to providing high amounts of empathy/compassion for others, and not being compassionate/empathetic towards ourselves. This is also referred to as 'Empathy Fatigue'. The difference between Compassion Fatigue and other forms of burnout are; compassion fatigue is the result of where people are emotionally invested in other people's well-being, often at the detriment of their own well-being. Those who are susceptible to compassion fatigue vary in terms of personality traits, levels of self-care, 'fixers', levels of compassion for yourself and previous life experiences. Vicarious trauma has large role to play in people developing compassion fatigue.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious Trauma is also referred to as 'secondary traumatic stress'. It is a process where individuals feel traumatised by other people's trauma. This process can happen in face to face interactions, watching traumatic incidents/news on TV/exposure to trauma on social media, hearing traumatic news on the radio or even through reading books. Many people feel empathy towards other people's trauma. However, individuals who are highly empathetic, not regularly filling their own 'bucket of self-care' and spending a lot of time cognitively worrying about other people and external trauma, are more susceptible to experiencing compassion fatigue.

Signs and symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Feeling physically and emotionally	Substance abuse, making unhealthy
Struggle to feel empathy towards others	Feeling critical of oneself
Dread of facing work, or certain individuals	Extreme feelings of distraction
Tolerance levels low, small tasks appear	Projection of frustration
Not being able to detach	Difficulty sleeping

How to Prevent Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

- Be aware of your limits and burnout zones
- Prioritise your self-care
- Awareness of problem
- Create a self-care plan (make time)
- Strengthen your resilience "fill up, empty out"
- Be mindful and present
- Focus on what works for you
- Tell somebody and/or seek support
- Boundaries – say NO!
- Improve your organisation skills and consider journaling
- Ensure adequate activities and exercise, healthy diet and plenty of sleep
- "Rest when you're well"

What is Self-Care?

The practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's wellbeing.
 Raising your awareness levels regarding your triggers and what depletes your energy levels.
 Being self-compassionate and giving yourself permission to stop and recharge your batteries.
 Self-care is not selfish, it is a necessity!