



Trying to Maintain Compassion? Try Offering Yourself Some!

The pandemic we are overcoming presents the perfect storm for compassion fatigue. In our new normal, many of us will experience the **stages of compassion fatigue**. Do these sound familiar?



First, in the **Zealot** stage, we have an over-abundance of “can do” activity. We stock up, we confer with others, we offer our assistance and we go the extra mile to keep ourselves and others safe. Along

the way, however, we start to notice the imperfections around us and move into the **Irritability** stage.

Our leaders contradict themselves at times, we see a neighbor’s car trunk full of toilet paper, our care providers point out a woefully unprepared system, and we fail to do all we planned. We move from “can do” to a sense of frustration and cynicism. Our hopefulness starts to wane. The more we learn, the more complicated this all seems to be. This can be overwhelming and lead us to the natural reaction of **Withdrawal**. We see the intricate connections between our health behaviors and our



economy and the day-to-day activities of life. We sleep more, engage less and find accessing energy for the tasks of caring for others and ourselves increasingly difficult. But we do keep on going and eventually may resume life with a new yet frenetic type of energy that is disconnected from others. This **Zombie** stage is when we put up walls by shedding connections to avoid facing the imperfections and complexities and “go it alone.” We trust our ability to care for ourselves and others all on our own with a new level of zealotry that can lead to sleeplessness, physical and mental strain, and certainly, ineffectiveness.



Of course, in none of these stages are we the person we want to be. We have been acting as if this is a sprint

COVID-19: Compassion in Action

instead of a marathon. We have not preserved our balance amid fear. We have been responding from our desire to do the right thing and may be on the path to do just the opposite. AND, this is the normal human response to overwhelming and complex challenges.

The antidote? There are many strategies we can learn together, and we will be sharing those in the next 8 postings. Today we start with an important one — turn inward and offer yourself compassion. Science has shown that self-compassion makes us less anxious, depressed, and self-critical — and more productive, supportive of others, and physically healthier.

As we walked you through the stages of compassion fatigue, what were you thinking and feeling about yourself?

1. Was there more self-kindness than self-criticism?
2. Did you feel singled out for ways that you might have fallen short or were you aware that you, like all of us, are doing your best and making some mistakes along the way?
3. Are you able to name your feelings to grow your self-awareness without getting pulled into a swirl of negative self-talk?

These three questions help define self-compassion and can become strategies to practice in the days ahead. When you notice that you are experiencing an uncomfortable feeling such as embarrassment, anger, or frustration, practice saying three things to yourself (things you would say to a friend):

1. *"I am sorry you are feeling this way, I know it is tough."*
2. *"Others experience this painful feeling too and many would understand you."*

3. *"You have taken the first step to dealing with the feeling by naming it. Good for you! Do you want to let it go or take another action?"*

A quick example from our team: "I noticed that I was sitting on my couch in a sort of fog for a few days. I knew I should be doing some sort of routine but felt stuck and was beating myself up. Then I practiced self-compassion. I told myself that this is a hard time for me and gave myself a hug. I thought about all the people right now who were feeling like I was and sitting on their couches too. I decided to give myself some time to continue sitting and reminded myself that I have never been able to do that for too long. Without kicking myself any further, the next day I began to find enjoyment out of taking a walk each morning and scheduling some facetime with people I knew might want some virtual company. Couch time has lessened and my compassion for others has increased as I offered myself some!"

