

Compassion Fatigue: Connection to Trauma, Stages and Assessments

Section 3



In this section of the toolkit we will delve more deeply into the concept of compassion fatigue; how it connects to our understanding of trauma, the stages that one might experience if compassion fatigue is not addressed, and how to assess our levels of secondary trauma, burnout and compassion satisfaction. As we grow in our understanding of the extent and impact of trauma on the students we teach, their families and our communities, our ability to maintain an open and compassionate approach can be challenged. Compassion fatigue can develop slowly overtime and go unrecognized. This section gives us insights that can guide us to take proactive measures to prevent its progression.



We know that being in the field of education can be rewarding and also challenging. Teaching and acquiring knowledge is hard work in and of itself; however, it can be more difficult when students present with obstacles, such as homelessness, community violence, physical and emotional abuse and domestic violence in the home environment. These trials often impede the learning process. [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction offers excellent resources](#) to better understand trauma, its impact and how to create trauma sensitive schools.

Staff that work with students who experience traumatic events are often deeply affected. Some staff may suffer from secondary trauma. Secondary trauma can happen to us when we come to know the traumatic events that the students we serve have experienced. While it is uncommon, some helpers experience some of the same symptoms of trauma as if the experience had happened to them.

Secondary trauma is one aspect of compassion fatigue. [Ross Greene, clinical child psychologist and respected author and trainer in the education field, refers to compassion fatigue quite simply as a decrease in a person's capacity to empathize with those who are suffering.](#) Adding the concept of burnout creates a more inclusive understanding of why some educators may experience compassion fatigue. Burnout can be the outcome when educators face unrealistic job expectations or do not know how to successfully meet typical expectations. Very few staff come to a job in a school setting knowing fully how to address multiple academic expectations as well as all of the behavioral challenges that are presented to them by their students. These expectations can be overwhelming and can lead to burnout if measures are not taken to build skills, support resilience and alleviate the symptoms.

What does compassion fatigue look like? What are the symptoms to look for early on to be able to minimize its impact and create (or return to) a path of resilience? Eric Gentry, PhD, offers a way to understand compassion fatigue in his staged model. Cat pictures were added to Gentry's work by some of the authors of this toolkit to add some fun and assist with memory. Staff at First Stage Milwaukee, created [this helpful video](#), set to the Overture from the musical Cats, to explain the stages.

Developed in partnership with:



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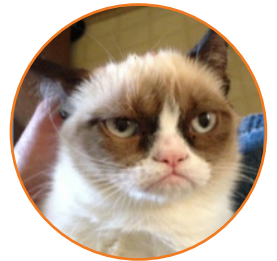
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Compassion Fatigue Cycle *(adapted from work of Eric Gentry, PhD 2012)*



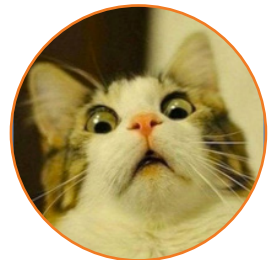
Zealot/Idealist — We are committed, involved, and available... Ready to problem solve... Ready to make a difference... We willingly put in extra hours... Our enthusiasm overflows... We volunteer... We are willing to go the extra mile and often do so without prompting... "I'll do that!!"

Irritability — We begin to see the imperfect nature of the systems and people around us... We distance ourselves from students, parents, coworkers and friends... Begin to belittle our colleagues and students/parents... We talk unfairly about their challenges and denigrate their efforts... The use of humor is sometimes strained... We daydream or become distracted when students are speaking with us... Oversights and mistakes begin to occur. We may notice our anger, cynicism, diminished creativity, and sadness.



Withdrawal — We are unable to embrace the complexity of the problems... We lose our ability to see students as individuals rather they become irritants... Complaints may be made about our work and we might have problems in our personal life... We are tired all the time... We no longer wish to talk about work and may not even admit to what we do... We neglect our family, our coworkers, our students and ourselves... Our shield gets thicker and thicker to block our pain and sadness. We may experience difficulty empathizing and feeling to numb to other's pain.

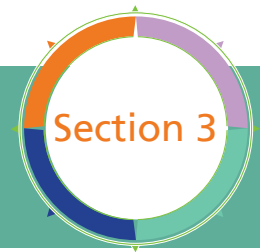
Zombie — Our hopelessness turns to rage... We begin to hate people... We even hate our coworkers if they dare question us... Others become incompetent or ignorant in our eyes... We work in a silo... We have no time for humor or fun. We may have a sense that we can't ever do enough, an inflated sense of importance related to our work, hyper-vigilance/ sleeplessness, and a sense of persecution.



Renewal vs. Pathology — If we have not addressed this cycle earlier, we come to a fork in the road where we either continue deeper into compassion fatigue to a place of pathology and victimization (overwhelmed, leaving the profession, changing positions and repeating the cycle, somatic illness) or we take a turn towards maturation and renewal (hardiness, resiliency, transformation).

The good news is that at any stage in the cycle, one can learn skills and mindsets that change the trajectory towards compassion satisfaction. The goal of this toolkit is for us to learn these mindsets and skills in order to proactively address our ways of being to avoid compassion fatigue and, when it does arise, address it early with confidence and support. It is beneficial to begin by getting a sense of the starting place for ourselves. The ProQOL is a helpful self-assessment that will be shared in this section.

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SELF-CARE



Throughout the toolkit, we will practice strategies to support compassion resilience from the four sectors of the Wellness Compass.

STRATEGIES

HEART: Commonalities Practice to Build Compassion

Try this five-step exercise when you are with a student, colleague, or family member and feelings of compassion seem out of reach. Do it discreetly and try to do all the steps with the same person. You can begin by simply bringing someone to mind. Eventually you can do this when you want to bring yourself out of a place of judgment in a tough interaction with another person. At the root of it all, we are all human beings that crave attention, and recognition, and affection, and above all, happiness.

With your attention geared to the other person, tell yourself:

Step 1: "Just like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life."

Step 2: "Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life."

Step 3: "Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair."

Step 4: "Just like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs."

Step 5: "Just like me, this person is learning about life."

Adapted from [Zen Habits: A Guide to Cultivating Compassion in Your Life, With 7 Practices](#)



WHAT'S NEXT

System Drivers of Compassion Fatigue