



# CONNECTING MINDS

## DEMENTIA CARE NEWSLETTER

Published by Dementia Network Algoma

Winter 2009

### RUNNING ON EMPTY? EXPERIENCING COMPASSION FATIGUE?

#### Are you a health care worker running on empty?

You may be experiencing compassion fatigue. This article will assist you to learn how to recognize the symptoms of compassion fatigue. Fortunately, compassion fatigue is a treatable problem as long as you are able to recognize the symptoms early so that you can minimize the impact on yourself and those in your care.

#### What is compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue may occur as a result of caring for others who are in physical and emotional pain. This caring can be an immensely rewarding experience, and the daily contact with residents is what keeps many people working in this field. The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brought us into this work: our empathy for others. In meeting the physical and/or emotional needs of residents/clients who require care, health care workers may be at risk of experiencing increasingly stressful work environments. This may include heavy case loads, dwindling resources, cynicism and negativity from co-workers, low job satisfaction and, for some the risk of being physically assaulted by residents. This may be viewed as the "cost of caring", resulting in deep physical and emotional exhaustion. Results may be a pronounced change in the caregiver's ability to empathize with residents, loved ones and co-workers, as well as feeling a loss of career enjoyment. This is compassion fatigue.

#### What are the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue?

It is vitally important that each health care worker be able to recognize their own warning signs that indicate they are experiencing compassion fatigue. These might include some of the following:

- \* Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- \* Anger and irritability
- \* Dread of working with certain clients/residents
- \* Heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- \* Hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional material
- \* Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- \* Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients/residents
- \* Problems with intimacy and interpersonal relationships
- \* Exhaustion

#### Why is it important to recognize one's own symptoms of compassion fatigue?

1. It can serve as an important "check-in" process for workers who are feeling unhappy and dissatisfied but who do not have the words to explain what is happening to them.
2. It can allow caregivers to develop a warning system for themselves.

A compassion fatigue self test has been developed that can be taken on line. Developed by Drs. Figley and Stamm, it is considered the most effective screening tool to date. [www.isu.edu/bhstamm/tests.htm](http://www.isu.edu/bhstamm/tests.htm) <file://www.isu.edu/bhstamm/tests.htm> . Being able to recognize that one's level of compassion fatigue is creeping up is a sign to implement strategies before the situation becomes worse. If one learns to identify their compassion fatigue symptoms on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the worst they have ever felt about their work/compassion and 1 being the best they have ever felt) and they learn to identify what an 8 or a 9 looks like for them (e.g., "when I am getting to an 8, I notice it because I don't return phone calls, think about calling in sick a lot, and can't watch any violence on TV").

#### What are contributing factors?

Experts have discovered that compassion fatigue exists on a continuum, meaning that at various times, you may be more immune to its damaging effects and at other times feel very beaten down by it. Many factors contribute to this continuum. Life's current circumstances will account for some factors. The worker's personal circumstances, history, coping style and personality style all effect how he or she feels. Likely the individual also has other life stressors that compound work stressors. For example, many are in the "sandwich generation", meaning that they care for both children at home and aging parents. In relation to working conditions, the actual residents and their stories may not always be the main source of stress. It is also the paperwork, the new computerized time-track system that has to be learned and the list goes on. Moreover, health care workers spend their time caring for people who are not understood in our society and often do work that other people don't want to hear about.

#### How to prevent compassion fatigue?

1. Compassion fatigue might be considered an occupational hazard because of the empathy that is felt for others in this type of career. It might be helpful to normalize the problem for one another by openly discussing and recognizing compassion fatigue in the workplace. You can work towards developing a supportive work environment that will encourage proper debriefing, regular breaks, peer support, assessing and changing workloads. Adequate access to professional development is available through your local PEC (public education co-coordinator) and PRC (psychogeriatric resource consultant). Check with the nurse educator in the HR department at your place of employment. Regular check-in times where staff can safely discuss the impact of their work on their personal and professional lives is a valuable resource.

2. You are an important part of your work organization and necessary for the efficient operation of your agency or LTC Home. Improved self care is the cornerstone of prevention. This may seem obvious, but most caregivers tend to put their needs last and feel guilty for taking time from their busy schedules to exercise, meditate or have a massage. On the personal front, workers need to carefully and honestly assess their life situation. Is there a balance between nourishing and depleting activities in their lives?

3. Begin to develop your own prevention toolkit. This kit should reflect your own reality and integrate life circumstances and work challenges. Schedule a regular check-in time with yourself every week. Here are some key questions to ask yourself.

- \* How am I doing?
- \* What are my warning signs? On a scale of 1 to 10, what does a 4 represent for me? What about a 9?
- \* What things do I have control over?
- \* What things do I not have control over?
- \* What stress-relief strategies do I enjoy and do they work for me?
- \* What stress-resiliency strategies can I use?

4. Don't be afraid to seek extra help. Compassion fatigue can lead to very serious problems and you deserve to have help. Many employers have an EAP (employee assistance program) available to all employees. Talk to your physician about options such as counseling needs to focus on a combination of screening for and treatment of compassion fatigue and any resulting complications.

In summary, as caring individuals it is of utmost importance for all of us to be aware of the signs, symptoms and contributing factors of compassion fatigue, in order to be in a better position to prevent running on empty. You may need to make life changes and assess work-life balance in order to cope with repeated exposure to traumatic events/material. Developing compassion fatigue is a gradual, cumulative process, however, once identified healing and recovery from its affects are possible so that you can once again focus on your chosen path of helping others.



*“The capacity to care is the thing that gives life its deepest significance and meaning.”*

*- Pablo Casals, world renowned cellist*

#### **January is Alzheimer Awareness Month**

This year's theme is “Put your mind to it”, which is a call to action for members of Canadian society to support dementia research, reduce the stigma of the disease, and become Alzheimer's advocates.

#### **2009 Alzheimer Education Conference Focuses on Person Centred Care**

Mark Friday, March 6, 2009 on your calendars for the 8th Annual Education Conference. Local physician Dr. Frank Ianni begins the day as the key-note speaker on a topic that is becoming more widely recognized—vascular dementia. Learn how to distinguish this form of dementia from other types, and what to expect in terms of diagnosis and treatment. The remainder of the day is then turned over to renowned author, practitioner, and dementia expert Carol Bowlby-Sifton. Carol has made person-centered care a focus of her practice, and will teach participants the essential elements of applying this philosophy to the physical, emotional, and activational care of persons with dementia. Cost to attend is \$45 per person if registering before February 13, 2009. Call 942-2195 for more information.

Sault College Continuing Education will be offering an

#### ***Introduction to Dementia Care***

Starting February 10, 2009.

The course will run for three weeks on Tuesday evenings from 7-9pm.

To register call Sault College at 759-2554

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