

## **Compassion Fatigue - Why Carers Need To Care For Themselves As Well**

*by **Helen Turner**, a freelance writer and mother with a background in health, she finds it important to write about issues that could help facilitate change in people's lives for the better*

Caring for others is a complex business. It can be tough physically, it's often tough logistically, and it's [always tough emotionally](#). While it's often rewarding, and brings with it a tenderness and an understanding of humanity on a level which others may never experience, it is also a complicated task, emotionally speaking. The mix of love, guilt, frustration, hope, anger, joy, and despair experienced by many carers can take a huge toll, leading to 'burnout' and a whole host of associated problems. When you're caring for someone else, it is doubly important that you also practice self-care. Unfortunately, the nature of caring means that we often think that we have to be completely 'selfless' when caring for others, and we feel guilty about catering to our own needs. In fact, caring for yourself will help you to care for others more effectively and more compassionately, whereas being 'selfless' will lead to stress, anger, and burnout.

### **'Compassion Fatigue'**

'Compassion Fatigue' is an umbrella term for a list of problems which frequently afflict carers who do not practice enough self-care. Issues include:

- Apathy to suffering,
- Isolation,
- 'Bottling' of emotions,
- Substance abuse,
- Poor emotional control,
- Irritability.

'Compassion fatigue' [is also known as Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder](#), because it is a form of traumatic stress brought on by tense preoccupation with the suffering of another. Those suffering from it will find their own mental health deteriorating to the point where they are no longer able to provide a decent standard of care. They may start to take stress out on their patients, or engage in self-destructive 'coping' strategies, or otherwise find themselves making a difficult situation worse. The danger is especially high if the patient's troubles [are to some extent self-inflicted](#) (i.e. if they are a substance abuser, or have injured themselves in a reckless accident), as in such circumstances, compassion fatigue may cause resentment or blame to bubble to the surface.

### **Guilt And Compassion Fatigue**

One of the main 'drivers' of compassion fatigue [is guilt](#), as it is guilt which prevents many carers from taking enough time to care for themselves. Those who care for others often feel that they should be catering to the needs of their loved on 24/7, and view any 'time off' from this as a kind of betrayal. It is important to remember that care for yourself is absolutely essential if you are to care for another, and it is, in fact, selfish to let your feelings of guilt impede your ability to give your loved one the standard of care that they deserve. So do not deny your own needs in favour of someone else's - doing so is, in fact, denying both of your needs.

### **Self Care For Carers**

Of course, having said this, the demands of being a carer do limit your self-care options somewhat. A carer cannot, for example, take a duvet day in the same way that others can. They have to be attending to the needs of someone else as well as their own. However, carers can ensure that they are fulfilling their own basic needs as best they can, and must learn to spot opportunities to enact some self-care. It is important to eat healthily, to get enough sleep, and to get enough exercise. Maintaining physical health in this manner will go a long way towards making sure that your mental health also remains intact. Further to this, learning to recognise the early signs of burnout, and developing coping strategies to avoid it is essential if you are to be a carer for any length of time. A supportive network of friends [is a huge advantage](#) for anyone caring for a loved one - having someone to not only pick up

the slack, but to whom you can unburden your concerns is very beneficial indeed in these circumstances. Do not be afraid to ask for help when you need it! Finally, learning relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga may help you to relax and eliminate stress when you start to feel the pressure. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another - so a lot of this is about finding your own self-care strategies. However, it is imperative that you do remember to practice self-care, if not for your own sake, for the sake of those that are depending upon you.

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