

# Put the Oxygen Mask on Your

# SELF

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**W**e talk with, train and are trained by mental health professionals from all over the world. We have worked with the traumas and the dramas of life, not just the major events like Hurricane Katrina, September 11, and the 2004 Asian tsunami. Among the many things we share is our passion for the work of caring for others. We believe that you, the reader, are a caring human being; that you enjoy helping people, particularly those who are suffering and stuck. And we also believe that you are vulnerable to compassion fatigue.

We are gratified and inspired by our clients. Those of us who work as counselors and therapists do so from a motivation that is sacred; it is a calling. To say the least, helping others often brings us joy. The joy and satisfaction of our work may undermine our ability to recognize that our work is also emotionally toxic. The same tendencies we have for helping others make us especially vulnerable to overlooking our own needs. It is as if we have a self-care blind spot. However, there are things you can do to recognize and deal with the toxicity and the blind spot in order to avoid compassion fatigue, the ultimate cost of caring.

Our favorite saying when talking about compassion fatigue comes from the instructions we get from flight attendants about oxygen masks before the plane departs. We apply it to self-care when working with suffering people: “Don’t forget to put the oxygen mask on yourself first.” We can’t help others—on or off an airplane—unless we attend to our own needs first.



# FIRST

Self-Care When Working with the Traumatized



This issue of *Family Therapy Magazine* assembles a great group of family therapists to talk about the challenges of our work and its impact on us. Martha Teater's focus on treating emergency workers emphasizes the burden of regret for not saving everyone more quickly. Emergency workers may bear a double burden if they themselves are in harm's way. Sheri Ferguson emphasizes the special stressors of the clergy in their dual role as counselors and as leaders in the faith community. Kyle Killian discusses some myths and realities about self-care, and presents some very interesting research. Mary Jo Barrett, with several decades of experience as a sexual trauma therapist, talks about secondary trauma in this area and what to do about it. Dorothy Becvar talks about the secondary trauma of caring for the dying and terminally ill, either as a professional or in the dual role of loved one and professional.

We will discuss the results of compassion fatigue research thus far, and have included some useful references and resources for readers who wish more details.

### **How Do I know if It's Burnout or Compassion Fatigue?**

Therapists who are experiencing a lot of stress at their jobs can ask themselves the following question: Do I love my work? If the answer is "no," it is most likely that you are suffering from burnout. If the answer is "YES!" you are more likely suffering from compassion fatigue.

Research supports these simple statements. In contrast with those who are burned out (Pines & Aronson, 1988), helpers experiencing compassion fatigue often love their job and the work they do. This was clear from a series of surveys among professionals and volunteers who work with animals (Figley & Roop, 2006). Indeed, the results of a survey of social workers working in the New York City region showed that working with traumatized people was unrelated to burnout, but highly related to the development of compassion fatigue. Both burnout and compassion fatigue

were associated with poor social support by colleagues (Boscarino, Figley & Adams, 2004).

Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue is accompanied by a rapid onset of symptoms and is likely to be more pervasive than burnout; it emerges suddenly with little warning; there is a sense of helplessness, shock and confusion; there is a sense of isolation, and the symptoms seem disconnected from the real causes. Despite this, those who suffer from compassion fatigue often report an ongoing sense of responsibility for the care of the sufferer and their suffering. There is a near failure on the part of compassion fatigue sufferers for getting (or even knowing how to get) relief from burdens of responsibility to those they tried to help.

To measure compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction, we recommend the Professional Quality of Life Scale: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Subscales—Revision IV (ProQOL). The ProQOL is a free tool to complete in private and provides unbiased feedback about how you are faring in the work environment. We encourage you to take this short test. The results may motivate you to do something now about your own self-care.

### **What Should You Do About It? Helping Your Self; Helping Others**

As the articles in this issue illustrate, working with suffering people is both rewarding and sometimes hard to take. Most note that self-care is critical. When we are stressed, it is difficult to know where to start. Several suggestions follow.

**1. Begin with ethical standards.** The GreenCrossAcademyofTraumatology's Web site contains two basics: *Standards of Practice* and *Standards of Self-Care*. The *Standards of Practice, Section II.2. Responsible Caring* states:

*Traumatologists recognize that service to survivors of traumatic events can exact a toll in stress on providers. They maintain vigilance for signs in themselves and colleagues of such stress effects,*

*and accept that dedication to the service of others imposes an obligation to sufficient self-care to prevent impaired functioning (see Figley, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).*

*The Standards of Self-Care include Section V.B. Standards for Establishing and Maintaining Wellness, which calls us all to make a formal and tangible commitment to, in effect, having a life outside of work that counterbalances the intensity of our professional work. This section and other sections provide good guidance for doing so.*

**2. Increase your knowledge base.** After reading this issue, you may be interested in doing more to simply help yourself. We urge you to consider getting training in this area to not only help yourself, but to help others. There are a variety of courses that address basic stress management and self-care. Several Web sites offer

free educational materials. Download free video clips from Gift From Within. Titles include *When Helping Hurts: Sustaining Trauma Workers* and *When Helping Hurts: Preventing and Treating Compassion Fatigue*. The ProQOL and video clips are easy tools to use to introduce the concept of compassion fatigue in your workplace.

**3. Become certified.** We recommend that you become certified via the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology as a Compassion Fatigue Educator and Compassion Fatigue Therapist by taking courses at one of the Green Cross Academy's Accredited Training Sites. *Certified Compassion Fatigue Educator Certification* is earned by those who complete the course of training or equivalent training and experiences associated with the theory and research, assessment, and prevention of work-related compassion fatigue. The certification is for those who are primarily

interested in teaching and guiding colleagues about self-care, developing and managing a self-care plan, and effective compassion fatigue stress management. *Certified Compassion Fatigue Therapist Certification* is earned by those who complete the Certified Compassion Fatigue Educator Certification or equivalent and a program of study covering the assessment and treatment of secondary traumatic stress reactions (PTSD), the MASTERS transformative process, and the competencies for designing a compassion fatigue prevention program in a given work context.

**4. Work towards systemic change.** Raise the awareness level of those who work with the traumatized. Serve as a role model by practicing strong self-care. Be the first in your area or your workplace to conduct a workshop session on compassion fatigue (use free video clips mentioned earlier and ProQOL). Encourage others to include compassion fatigue awareness and self-care as an ongoing part of their staff development program. Advocate for compassion fatigue training at the meetings and conferences you attend.

None of us know what tomorrow or next year will bring. Life is short. But the world will always need caring and passionate professional helpers. But to be really effective and compassionate, we must first put on our own masks of self-care and leave them on as long as needed. Self-care is just that. We cannot depend on anyone else. We hope this article and issue focusing on compassion fatigue will help stop the conspiracy of silence and lead to more effective education and supervision. By doing so, we will help the next generation of therapists to first do no harm to themselves as they care for others. ○



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**DEFINITIONS**

**BURNOUT** is defined in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as "exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration." It is something that gradually builds to a breaking point and the stress and frustration comes from all types of work-related sources.

**SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS** (or Compassion Stress): a set of psychosocial and emotional factors caused by a specific event or series of events affecting helpers indirectly through another, such as a family member, friend, or client. It sometimes takes just one case or situation to have a lasting effect.

**COMPASSION FATIGUE:** "...state of exhaustion and dysfunction (biologically, psychologically and socially) as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress" (Figley, 1995). We become exhausted by the exposure to experience after experience of emotionally draining clients who look to us for help.



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#### **PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES**

**CERTIFICATION STANDARDS FOR COMPASSION FATIGUE EDUCATOR AND COMPASSION FATIGUE THERAPIST**, [http://www.traumatologyacademy.org/documents/CertificationStandards4CFE\\_CFT\\_000.pdf](http://www.traumatologyacademy.org/documents/CertificationStandards4CFE_CFT_000.pdf).

**GIFT FROM WITHIN**, [www.giftfromwithin.org](http://www.giftfromwithin.org).

**GREEN CROSS ACADEMY'S** Accredited Training Sites, <http://www.traumatologyacademy.org/AccreditedPrograms.html>.

**GREEN CROSS ACADEMY** of Traumatology, [www.greencross.org](http://www.greencross.org). Contains *Standards of Practice* and *Standards of Self-Care*.

#### **PROFESSIONAL QUALITY OF LIFE SCALE:**

Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Subscales—Revision IV (ProQOL), available at [http://www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/documents/proqol/ProQOL\\_vIV\\_English\\_Oct05.pdf](http://www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/documents/proqol/ProQOL_vIV_English_Oct05.pdf) and [http://www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/documents/proqol/ProQOL\\_Score\\_Handout\\_Oct05.doc](http://www.isu.edu/~bhstamm/documents/proqol/ProQOL_Score_Handout_Oct05.doc).

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