Compassion in the Death-care Industry: Essential and ... Profitable?

In the wake of a pandemic that has swept through every corner of the globe, much of the world still reels from the chaos and destruction that COVID-19 left in its unforgiving path. According to the World Health Organization, more than 6.5 million COVID deaths were recorded globally, while 1.04 million individuals in the U.S. died from the deadly virus.

By Andy Hau Yan Ho

End of life, death and bereavement care professionals, especially those in the funeral service sector, stood at the forefront in providing comfort and consolation to the dying and the bereaved during this unprecedented period. Yet, despite being our first line of defense in protecting individuals and families traumatized by death and loss, funeral directors have received little support for the extremely difficult and complex challenges that they have been expected to resolve with competency and compassion.
Many have found themselves suffering alone and in silence, battling overwhelming stress, unresolved grief and debilitating burnout that undermined not only their well-being, but also their productivity and desire to remain in the death-care industry. All of these would ultimately result in significant financial and human capital losses.

**The Negative Impact of Burnout**

This phenomenon of burnout is hardly news to us. We know that burnout can be devastating. Decades of research repeatedly has found that those undergoing tremendous stress can suffer from numerous physical morbidities, including heart disease, diabetes, gastrointestinal issues and respiratory problems. The less observable and equally devastating mental-health concerns can include anxiety, depression, mental exhaustion and a complete drain of one’s psychological, emotional, and spiritual strength.

The negative effects of unresolved work-related stress of one funeral director can trickle down to the rest of their team, threatening the integrity of the organization, and most importantly, the quality of supportive care rendered to clients and staff coping with loss and mortality.

In monetary terms and according to the Harvard Business Review, healthcare spending due to work-place burnout amounts to $125 billion to $190 billion per year; while the price tag for annual losses incurred due to manpower turnover and depreciating productivity is estimated at $322 billion by the World Economic Forum.

**Compassion is not the Culprit**

“These are astronomical figures!” is an understatement to say the very least. In our search for answers or to point fingers, the phrase “compassion fatigue” has often been cited as the main culprit for the crime of burnout. First coined by psychologist Charles Finley in 1995, compassion fatigue is an acute onset of personal suffering linked to an intense sharing of another’s negative emotion or witnessing of others’ distress. On the surface, this may ring true – we are after all, in the business of compassion.
Our work demands we be kind and empathetic to the suffering of another and led by the motivation to help. We often find ourselves putting other people’s needs ahead of our own, to see the world through their eyes, to walk in their shoes, to feel what they feel, in order to know what they need and how to support them. Therefore, it is not surprising that people have associated health and social care professional burnout with an overexertion of compassion. They have fallen so deep into their clients’ shattered worlds that they cannot withdraw themselves.

However, an ever-expanding body of cognitive-neuroscience research has now better-defined empathy and compassion, while also dispelling the myth of compassion fatigue.

**Compassion is the Answer**

A multitude of studies have used fMRIs to measure brain activities of individuals undergoing specific social cognitive tasks, such as practicing empathy (witnessing, feeling and identifying with pain of another person) and practicing compassion (being mindfully present to the pain of another person with a motivation to help through the recognition of our interdependence). All of them have reported with precision that compassion does not, in fact, fatigue!

Specifically, researchers have found that when individuals practice empathy, the mirror neuron systems in our brains are activated. This allows us to “feel with” and synchronize our emotions with the other person. And, if we are not mindful when practicing empathy, our self-other distinction becomes blurred, and we can easily get sucked into a world of pain as we experience the distress of another as our own.

On the other hand, when individuals practice compassion, the cognitive reward systems in our brains are activated. This enables us to “feel for” another person with the motivation to help as well as a clear “self-other” distinction, which allows us to recognize that, while we are here to help, we do not get sucked into the pain of another. Importantly, compassion triggers the release of oxytocin, a feel-good hormone that stimulates positive affect with those whom we are supporting.

Evidently, the hypothesis that we are burned out because of compassion fatigue does not hold true; on the contrary, compassion makes us want to do more to
support the people who are suffering because it makes us feel good about ourselves. On top of this, repeated research has consistently found that the practice of compassion can bring numerous physical and mental health benefits such as improved medical outcomes, reduced stress, increased happiness, enhanced social connectedness and greater longevity.

So, if we can nurture and cultivate compassion, we can strengthen our emotional capacity and inner resilience to better support those in need as well as ourselves. This can in turn enhance our professional competency and willingness to stay in one of toughest industries in the world.

Emma Seppälä, science director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education has reported that the cultivation of a compassionate and loving workplace culture can greatly reduce staff burnout and increase productivity. As such, compassion can not only mitigate financial loss; compassion can also be profitable!

**Nurturing Compassion**

To cultivate a compassionate workplace for our fellow funeral directors, end-of-life and bereavement-care professionals, we must first begin with ourselves. This is because a compassionate leader sets the foundation for a compassionate organization. While many of us believe that compassion is something that we do for others, we need to recognize that
compassion is also an inward experience, and that we can be compassionate to ourselves, too.

Psychologists Kristen Neff and Chris Germer have explained that self-compassion comprises three interacting components: self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over identification when confronting painful thoughts and emotions. A large body of research has provided robust evidence supporting the effectiveness of self-compassion practices in promoting psychological well-being, reducing depression and anxiety, as well as enhancing health and overall physical functioning.

**Compassion and the Arts**

More recently, my research team and I at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore have examined the intersection between self-compassion practices and the expressive arts. In a recent study, we found that upon completing a six-week, 18-hour group psychotherapy, namely Mindful-Compassion Art-based Therapy, which integrated self-awareness with creative emotional expression, end-of-life and bereavement-care professionals experienced a significant reduction in mental exhaustion, as well as significant improvements in overall emotional regulation, non reactivity to intrusive thoughts and positive death attitudes.

We also found that the treatment gains of reduced mental exhaustion and increased emotional regulation were maintained 12 weeks later, with additional new benefits identified. These included an increased ability to observe and describe one’s experiences, elevated overall self-compassion, greater mindful awareness, an enhanced sense of common humanity and better quality of life.

**Compassion and Us**

By paying close attention to our feelings, listening deeply to our inner voices and finding creative ways to express our emotions constructively, we learn to become more open to our own suffering; our feelings of vulnerability, our insecurities, our sadness, our losses and our grief in bearing witness to the pain of others amid our professional work.
By being compassionate to ourselves, we create an emotional safety net, a holding space that allows our hidden sorrows to be felt and attended to. We can gift ourselves the courage to accept our limitations, the permission to identify and ask for what we need and the wisdom to comfort and care for our heart, mind and spirit.

Once we can attend to our own needs and emotions, we are then in a much better space to attend to the needs and emotions of others with much greater genuineness, authenticity and compassion.

The byproduct of all of this, of course, is greater productivity and profitability ... but who's counting anyway?