

# UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE

Rebecca Bundy, M.A., NCC, LPCC

## Signs & Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion  
(noun):

**A feeling of distress caused by the suffering of another and the desire to alleviate it.**

Fatigue (noun):

**The decreased capacity or inability to function normally because of excessive stimulation or prolonged exertion.**

Compassion  
Fatigue:

**Gradual lessening of compassion - for others and for self - over time. It is common among individuals who work directly with trauma.**

### Physical

- Exhaustion
- Sleep problems
- Headaches and migraines
- Increased susceptibility to illness
- Muscle tension

### Behavioral

- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Anger and irritability
- Exaggerated sense of responsibility
- Impaired ability to make decisions
- Forgetfulness
- Problems with intimacy
- Difficulty separating personal and professional life

### Psychological

- Guilt
- Depression
- Loss of hope
- Decreased ability to feel empathy
- Cynicism
- Dread of working
- Anxiety
- Inability to tolerate strong feelings
- Hypervigilance
- Spiritual crisis
- Survivor guilt
- Self-criticism

**NOTE:** Every person will have unique warning signs that they are moving into compassion fatigue. Learning to identify signs and developing prevention strategies builds resilience and allows for a more sustainable, meaningful career.

*Compassion fatigue is the profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professionals and caregivers can develop over the course of their career as helpers. It is a gradual erosion of all the things that keep us connected to others in our caregiver role: our empathy, our hope, and of course our compassion- not only for others but also for ourselves.*

*-Francoise Mathieu*

# PERSONAL RESILIENCE

“True self-care is not salt baths and chocolate cake, it is making the choice to build a life you don’t need to regularly escape from”

–Brianna Wiest

## NOTE:

Having a personal history of trauma, life stress, and working cross-culturally can increase one’s vulnerability to burnout and compassion fatigue. Working conditions and organizational culture can increase or decrease vulnerability.

## Developing Compassion Fatigue Resilience

---

1. Name, acknowledge, and feel your emotions. Feelings in themselves do not cause trauma, but resisting your feelings creates suffering.
2. Create a self-care toolbox of activities that sustain and restore you.
3. Take mini-breaks during the day & be sure to do at least one nourishing activity daily.
4. Assess your trauma input.
5. Learn to say no (or yes) more often. Take regular stock of your schedule and create a life that works for you.
6. Set your own boundaries rather than allowing others to set boundaries for you.
7. Delegate tasks at work and at home.
8. Limit rumination by engaging in activities that require your full attention. Step off the “hamster wheel”. Taking a break from over-thinking will lead you closer to a solution, as worry will only lead you farther from where you want to be.
9. Exercise regularly and eat nourishing foods.
10. Work within your expertise & invest in training to support career growth.
11. Resist the urge to withdraw. Reach out for supportive social connection.
12. Learn to debrief in a way that does not re-traumatize others.
13. Join and/or create a support group.
14. Seek counseling when needed.

*“You will burn and you will burn out. You will be healed and come back again.”*

*–Dostoevsky*

# ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

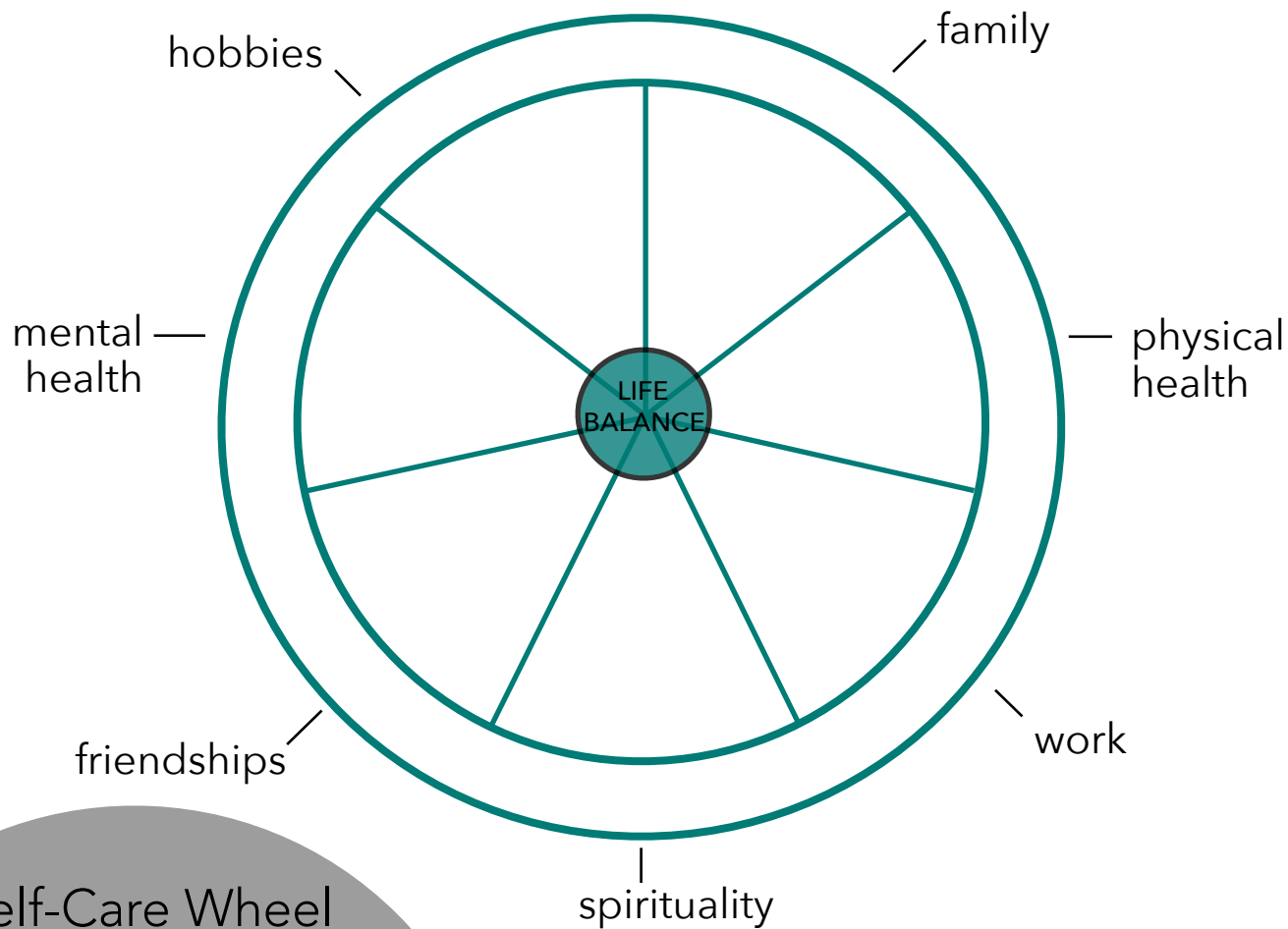
## **Corporate signs of compassion Fatigue**

- High rate of employee absenteeism
- Change in co-worker relationships
- Conflict among team members
- Staff members challenging or breaking company rules
- Inability of staff to complete assignments and tasks
- Not meeting deadlines
- Lack of flexibility and reluctance to change
- Negativity toward management
- Inability of staff to believe that improvement is possible
- Lack of a vision for the future
- Apathy & cynicism

## **Building Compassion Fatigue Resilience in your Organization**

- Schedule regular & healthy debriefing
- Provide training opportunities
- Build competency to reduce stress and increase effectiveness
- Creating a supportive team that values work/life balance
- Healthy pacing - encourage regular mini-breaks throughout day
- Normalize mental health needs
- Work part time if possible
- Be an organization that models and prioritizes self-care
- Have a clear purpose
- Clearly define roles
- Celebrate successes

# SELF-ASSESSMENT



## Assessing my Trauma Input

home

work

hobbies

technology

### Self-Care Wheel

**On the outside of the wheel,** please rate how satisfied you are in each area

**On the inside of the wheel,** please list ways you are currently or want to begin caring for yourself

**In the gray boxes,** please write down the trauma you are ingesting (example: news stories, movies, television shows, editing painful images, hearing traumatic client stories, caring for sick loved one)