Compassion Fatigue

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The Work of a Chaplain

suffering

empathy

another
Compassion Is a Good Thing, isn’t it?

- “sympathy for the suffering of others, often including a desire to help” – Encarta Dictionary
- “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it” – merriam-webster.com
- “… the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things.” – Thomas Merton
Secondary Traumatic Stress Syndrome

- The cost of caring related to witnessing the discomfort of others

  *(Vicarious Trauma is another term for STSS.)*

Burnout

- When a person has become exhausted by his/her profession or major life work
Impact of Chaplaincy Work

“Vicarious trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them.

“Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.”

- Headington Institute
Risk Factors for Compassion Fatigue

Personal
- Personality and coping style
- Personal history
- Current life circumstances
- Social support
- Spiritual resources
- Work style

Adapted from Headington Institute
Some people remain focused on crisis all the time

Examples:
- ER nurse who runs ambulance in free time
- Prison chaplain who volunteers on crisis hotline in free time
Risk Factors for Compassion Fatigue

Environment / Context
- Professional role, work setting, and exposure
- Agency support
- Affected population’s responses and reactions
- Cultures of intolerance
- Cultural styles of expressing distress and extending and receiving assistance
- The culture of chaplaincy

Adapted from Headington Institute
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment and discouragement as an employee

- State of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations

- At highest risk are those with the most personal involvement
Cognitive:

- lowered concentration,
- apathy,
- rigidity,
- disorientation,
- minimization,
- preoccupation with trauma
- difficulty making good decisions
Emotional:

- powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, anger, numbness, fear, helplessness, sadness, depression, depleted, shock, blunted or enhanced affect.
- experiencing troubling dreams similar to a patient’s dream. Suddenly and involuntarily recalling a frightening experience while working with a patient or family
- difficulty managing your emotions;
- difficulty accepting or feeling okay about yourself
Behavioral:

- Irritable, withdrawn, moody, isolating,
- Poor sleep, nightmares,
- Appetite change,
- Hyper-vigilance,
- Problems managing the boundaries between yourself and others (e.g., taking on too much responsibility, having difficulty leaving work at the end of the day, trying to step in and control other’s lives),
- Problems in relationships,
- Difficulty feeling connected to what’s going on around and within you
Spiritual:

- questioning life’s meaning,
- pervasive hopelessness,
- loss of purpose,
- loss of hope
- questioning of religious beliefs,
- loss of faith/skepticism
Somatic:

- sweating, rapid heartbeat, breathing difficulty,
- aches and pains,
- dizziness, impaired immune system,
- headaches,
- difficulty falling or staying asleep,
- illnesses,
- accidents
Impact at Work

- Make decisions without adequate reflection;
- Make mistakes that cost time or money, and may even put people at risk;
- Take on too much work, or assignments that the team or agency is ill-prepared to complete;
- Not fulfill commitments;
- Take excessive unplanned time off;
- Blame others instead of seeking understanding and productive collaboration;
- Devalue and/or ridicule beneficiaries, staff, managers, or donors; and
- Infect colleagues with their own cynicism, depression, and/or lack of motivation.
Coping ABC’s

- Awareness
- Balance / Boundaries
- Choice
Coping with Compassion Fatigue

Exposure to trauma isn’t going to stop. But you can mitigate the effects this exposure has on you. Here are a few strategies:

• Debrief.
• Take care of yourself.
• Strive for balance and interconnection.
• Come up with a plan.
• Seek help.

Wisconsin Lawyer – December 2011
When someone deeply listens to you, it is like holding out a dented cup you've had since childhood and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim, you are understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you, the room where you stay starts a new life and the place where you wrote your first poem begins to glow in your mind's eye.

It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you, your bare feet are on the earth and a beloved land that seemed distant is now at home within you.

~ John Fox
Good coping strategies are things that help you take care of yourself – especially things that help you:

- **Escape**: Getting away from it all, physically or mentally;
- **Rest**: Having no goal or time-line, or doing things you find relaxing;
- **Play**: Engaging in activities that make you laugh or lighten your spirits
Coping Mechanisms

- Need to change view of work
  - not enough time away from work to do all our coping away from work
- “Functional Atheism” – acting as if everything depends on my effort
- Recognize limits
  - Limits of self
  - Limits of system
  - Limits in clients
Watch for compassion fatigue

The world is filled with pain and suffering – the First Noble Truth has a reality basis to it. None of us gets through life without a handful of heartaches or traumatic experiences. Sometimes, listening to the pain and suffering of others can cause us to close off our hearts. And a closed heart can’t love as fully or listen as deeply as an open heart.

What is one to do when there is so much pain in the world and the heart is so vulnerable? How does one listen and not fall victim to compassion fatigue? One way is to make it a point balance seeing the beauty around us that is as equally abundant as the pain and suffering. By breathing in the beauty of mother earth and the mystery of creation, we take time for renewal, time required to sustain us in listening to others’ pain. Practicing gratitude is one more good way to keep a heart open and ready to reach out to listen and love and to receive the love and grace from others. For it’s not so much the ears we use to hear with, as it is our hearts.

From Right Listening by Mark Brady
Practice:

- Find the gift, the abundance, the beauty in the world around you this very minute. Look at the clouds, the sun, or the rain, or the birds outside your window.

- Remember that you are part of an incredible creation beyond our comprehension. Breathe in a belly full of that mystery and grace.

From *Right Listening* by Mark Brady
Resources