

Compassion Fatigue



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proud to nurse*

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Normal Stress

If you live in the 20th century,
you're familiar with stress. Some
stress is unavoidable of course,
and not all stress is bad

It's our inability to cope with it
that sometimes causes problems
for us

Abnormal Stress

Overpowering, invasive stress can begin to dominate us and interfere with our ability to function.

We become angry, ineffective, apathetic, and depressed.

Joinson (1992)

Elements of burnout can occur in any setting, a unique form of it, compassion fatigue, affects people in caregiving professions.

Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue is linked directly to particular people i.e. nurses, ministers, and counsellors.

Unfortunately, nurses are very susceptible to it.

Joinson (1992)

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Definition

McHolm (2006) describes compassion fatigue as 'the emotional, physical, social and spiritual exhaustion that overtakes a person and causes a pervasive decline in his or her desire, ability, and energy to feel and care for others'.

Compassion

Lewin (1996) states %it is a complex emotion that allows caregivers to hold and sustain themselves in emotional balance while holding patients despair in one hand and their (the caregivers) hopefulness in the other+.

He went on to say, %tis the core value of the caregiver& work, and the essence of compassion is what gives nursing its soulfulness, staying power, and healing resources+.

Compassion

Nurses experience a strong feeling of empathy, deep sympathy at times, and even sorrow when their patients are stricken by suffering and misfortune due to illness and/or trauma, and have a strong desire generally to alleviate that pain or remove its cause.



Compassion Fatigue

- Is a complex problem resulting from helping others who are suffering
- Results in psychological, physical, social symptoms; decreased productivity and increased errors
- May be resolved by self help strategies, but higher levels require professional intervention

Compassion fatigue is not pathological in the sense of a mental illness, but is considered a behavioural response that results from helping or desiring to help another person suffering pain or trauma

Problems arise when caregivers are given the same relentless, difficult, mind and energy sapping assignments day after day in the workplace, coupled with the requirements in their private life.

They are giving of themselves all day then they go home to nurture some more.

Trouble is nurses forget to
turn of that nurturing mindset!



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Is it Burnout?

Burnout is associated with the problems that arise out of routine nursing work such as time pressure, sick and complex patients, high workloads, coordination of care between departments, and conflict with other staff members.

°Burnout+reminds
us of a candle that
goes out because
the wax has been
used up+.

McHolm(2006)



Burnout

Occurs in situations where nurses experience powerlessness, frustration and difficulty in meeting professional and personal expectations.

Nurses with burnout adapt to their exhaustion by becoming less empathetic, more withdrawn and irritable.



Susan

Susan is glad her holidays have finally arrived. She loves being a nurse, but after working two years on the oncology ward, the pressures of changing shifts, frequent understaffing and late stays to finish paperwork are taking their toll.

Susan frequently feels tired, and the attitudes of her co-workers irritate her.

Susan knows she will be refreshed and ready to face work again after her vacation at the beach.

Compassion fatigue

Is a response to people who are sick and suffering rather than the work situation.

Compassion Fatigue

Unlike burnout it isn't the result of being busy, but rather it occurs from giving high levels of energy and compassion over a long period of time to patients who are suffering, often without experiencing the positive outcomes of seeing patients get better.

McHolm (2006)

It feels like a Battle Zone!

Our nights are broken by sounds of nearby mortars, the drone of medevac (medical evacuation) helicopters, and endless nightmares.



Each new day brings us more patients who wrench our hearts.

Then we get up and do it all again.



We've become intimately familiar with the brutalities of war.

Compassion Fatigue

Occurs in situations that include a high turnover of patients who are acutely ill, rotating shifts and frequent changes of assigned jobs.

Compassion Fatigue

Affects medical personnel who work in crisis oriented areas such as emergency or trauma. These are the caregivers who are the most vulnerable, but almost any area of health work can contribute to the development of compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigued nurses continue to give themselves fully to their patients, finding it difficult to maintain a healthy balance of empathy and objectivity. Figley (2002)

Jane just can't shake the fatigue, sadness and emptiness that consumes her waking hours. When she first started working in the emergency team, it was exciting to respond to emergencies. Now, as patients come in, it almost feels as though she's being injured. Sometimes she wakes up after dreaming that she hears cries of pain or sees patients and family members' agonised faces in her sleep. Jane knows she is one of the best nurses in the department, but feels that if she would learn more, try a little harder and think faster she could decrease the patients' suffering. Jane wishes she could be like some of her co-workers who seem to numb their feelings and remain focused on the technical aspects of what needs to be done.

Compassion fatigue is a process. It develops over time . sometimes taking weeks or even years to surface.

Its a low-level chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in a nurses life . whether at work or in their home.

Overtime a carers ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of their skills of compassion.

Clinical Presentation

- Cognitive - < concentration, low self esteem, and apathy
- Emotional . feelings of anxiety, guilt, anger to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness
- Behavioural . irritability, moodiness, appetite changes and sleep disturbances
- Personal relationships . withdrawal, mistrust and isolation exacerbating the loneliness the nurse is experiencing

- Somatic complaints . generalised aches and pains to impaired immunity
- Work performance . exhaustion, low motivation, absenteeism, detachment or apathy
- Spiritual . questions the meaning of life, his or her own purpose, questions belief systems, values and commitment that provide feelings of emotional safety and trust.

Bush (2009)

Scenario

Here are two nurses responses to their environment. Which one of these nurses has compassion fatigue and why?

Without warning, **Jackie Kemp** shift became a nightmare. Her favourite patient went into a fatal decline and slipped away without rallying. Jackie's desperate efforts to keep her alive were useless.

This woman's situation broke my heart, +

says Jackie, an RN specialising in bone marrow transplants.

She was only in her 30s, the mother of young children. I had so much in common with her.+

Jackie grieved for the woman but found that lingering feelings of helplessness and anger still dominated her thoughts. She eventually went to her pastor for help in confronting those emotions.

Marian Wilson, a staff nurse on a surgical unit, stopped crying over patients long ago. After going through a period of despair and frustration that nearly drove her away from nursing, she knew she had to learn to control her feelings.

I am not indifferent to my patients' pain - there isn't a more competent nurse on the unit. But I have stopped getting involved in it, and now I let the family provide patients' emotional support.

Joinson (1992)

Jackie Kemp displayed a far healthier reaction. She was compassionate and acted as a caregiver by empathising and bonding with her patient.

She then nurtured and comforted the woman, grieved at her death, and made use of her support system.

Conversely, when **Marian Wilson** stopped crying over her patients long ago, she stepped into compassion fatigue and lost her ability to nurture.

The pain she denies leaves her ineffective as a caregiver. She never dealt with her compassion fatigue . she ignored it.

Her sense of detachment is cutting away at an important component of her personality and may eventually lead her to crisis again

Compassion Fatigue

The very thing that draws us to nursing - being a supportive part of a person's health needs - is exactly what can cause us to suffer from it.

The compassionate nurse demonstrates both feelings of sympathy for that individual and a strong desire to stop the suffering.

Murphy (2010)

Compassion Fatigue

Is when caregivers consistently give out more energy and compassion than they receive, and manifests itself as physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion.

Frandsen (2010)

Compassion fatigue

Occurs when healthcare workers are continually exposed to negative events experienced by their patients, and over time an accumulative state occurs as the nurse is overwhelmed by this secondary exposure

Frandsen (2010)

On the ground symptoms

- Feelings of tiredness before you even start your workday
- Lack of enjoyment in leisure activities
- Compulsive acts, such as over drinking, over eating, over spending
- Excessive blaming

- Chronic physical ailments, such as back pain or stomach upset that may result in the use of sick days
- Excessive complaints about your job, peers, assignments

Murphy (2010)

Combating Compassion Fatigue

Prevention is better than a cure.

- **Take care of yourself first** . make sure you take your allocated breaks at work, managers please assist and insist your staff to do this
- **Take care of your physical health** . get good quality sleep, try to make healthy eating choices, exercise regularly

Prevention

- **Talk to your family, friends and peers** about how to find a better balance with your job responsibilities and home life
- **Learn to set boundaries.** If asked to help with a patient load when you already have a taxing load yourself . say no.
- **Recognise your limitations** . nurses cannot stop all suffering or solve all health problems. They can be there for the patient without needing to fix everything

Prevention

- **Recharge regularly** with things you enjoy doing out of work. Make these activities as important as eating and sleeping.
- **Stimulate your mind** . keep learning, nursing is a caring profession but also a scientific one. Continued learning allows your emotional centres in your brain to rest and stimulates the cognitive centres for better balance

Murphy (2010)

Treating compassion fatigue identifies the cost of caring to those in emotional distress and highlights that helping the traumatised can be quite traumatising!

Figley (2002)

Recognising the signs of compassion fatigue and taking steps to prevent and treat it, can provide a nurse with the resiliency that makes nursing a rewarding profession to be in.

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