

Interventions for preventing compassion fatigue among mental health clinicians

Finding God, Balm for the Weary Heart

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“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

Rachel N. Remen

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- Compassion Fatigue
 - Empathy Fatigue
- Therapist Burnout
- Self-care
- Spiritual Self-Care
- Spiritual Wholeness

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- Compassion Fatigue - *overexposure* resulting from *quality* (an acute awareness of the transience of life and the intensity of human suffering; the helplessness of the sufferer)
- Vicarious Trauma - *over-identification* resulting from a sacrificial ethos (attempt to replace and to suffer on behalf of the other without clarity for direction) (becoming the victim)
- Therapist Burnout - *overload* and *over demand* resulting from *quantity* (too many demands at the same time with the attempt to try harder)

Louw, Daniël. (2015). Compassion fatigue: Spiritual exhaustion and the cost of caring in the pastoral ministry. Towards a 'pastoral diagnosis' in caregiving.

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Compassion Fatigue

- “Profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professionals, missionaries, 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 role: our empathy, our hope, and of course our compassion, not only for others, but for ourselves.”

(The Compassion Fatigue Workbook)

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Compassion Fatigue

- We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or *we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer*. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren't sick, but we aren't ourselves.” – C. Figley, 1995

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Signs of Compassion Fatigue

- Inability to do simple tasks, make simple decisions...things feel overwhelming (returning calls, emails, notes)
- Physical and mental fatigue
- Blaming others for their suffering
- Feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness
- Avoidance or dread of working with some clients
- Reactive or excessive response
- Feels overwhelming to admit I'm not doing well or to ask for prayer
- On edge, or numbness...we drop out of our window of tolerance or our window of tolerance shrinks

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Empathy Fatigue

- "Empathy fatigue results from a state of psychological, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual and occupational exhaustion that occurs as the counselors' own wounds are continually revisited by their clients' life stories of chronic illness, disability, trauma, grief and loss."
- "Empathy fatigue and the other various fatigue syndromes (e.g., compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, vicarious traumatization) are natural artifacts of working in "high touch" professions such as ours. Counselors are trained in the facilitative skills of empathy. The nature of the client-counselor relationship requires a below-the-surface level of intense and compassionate listening. It requires us to be deeply involved in our client's woundedness and to respond empathically."

Mark Shebecki

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Empathy Fatigue

- "Empathy is a finite resource. You can run out. As a normal, psychological response, you cannot give of yourself again and again and again without replenishing."

Emmett Fitzgerald, Director Contemplative-Based Resilience Project

- "It's only prudent not to allow your empathy to run away with — or rather, from — you. By regulating exposure and effort, people can to some degree regulate the amount of empathy they feel and, in turn, control [its] resultant costs. . . . It may be more noble to be consistently empathic, but it is probably more adaptive to be variably empathic"

S. D. Hodges and K. J. K. Klein at the University of Oregon

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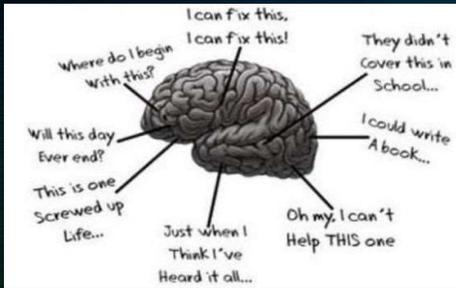
Empathy Fatigue

- “The identifiable victim effect.”
- The effect of one individual, identifiable, victim who is known in full detail can evoke a much deeper feelings, emotions and sympathy than a large group of anonymous individuals.

As therapists, we hold stories, pictures, memories, faces...day in and day out. Week after week.

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Therapist Burnout



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Therapist Burnout

- Burnout is about being ‘worn out’ and can affect any profession. The impacts of burnout emerge gradually over time and are easily identified to direct links and stressors within the working and personal life. Things that inspire passion, drive and enthusiasm are stripped away as tedious, unpleasant thoughts take over.
- Cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress, NOT necessarily trauma-related.
- Many people drawn to therapy are “helpers” who give until depleted; masters at [caregiving](#) but novices at self-care.

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Therapist Burnout = Trust Issue

- Ungodly self-reliance
- We become responsible for our clients and their healing.
- Our clients progress becomes the barometer of our success, our value, and ultimately our identity.
- “If you are saying or not saying something to a client because you are afraid of losing them as a client...you are not doing good counseling” Robin R, Clinical Supervisor

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Signs of Therapist Burnout

- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Feeling “drained”
- Loss of appetite
- Mental exhaustion
- Mild depression
- Persistent or recurring illness
- Persistent physical exhaustion
- Sleeplessness

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Signs of Therapist Burnout

- Drag yourself into work most days
- Teach rather than listen
- Begin sessions late and/or end early
- Experience a noticeable decline in empathy, leading to judgment and resentment
- Feel relieved when clients cancel
- Self disclose in ways that don't help the client
- Fantasize about that dream job where you don't have to deal with people's problems and are appreciated

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Self Care

- Self care is not just about ‘feeling good’. It’s about being a good steward of the life (body, profession, gifts, vocation) that God has given you.
- “We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for.” ~Henri Nouwen

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Self Care

- “To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it.” – Saint Teresa of Calcutta
- Beyond food and water, what is your proverbial oil that keeps you burning?
- We each need to know the signs that tell us we are out of balance. What makes you come alive? What sucks the life out of you? Not sure... make it part of your Examen at the end of the day

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Self Care

- Personal
 - Physical
 - Psychological (emotional/spiritual)
 - Social/interpersonal
- Professional
 - Work/life balance
 - Boundaries
 - Time
 - Clients
 - Personal/professional
 - Peer support/supervision
- Professional Quality of Life Scale: Measures Compassion Satisfaction, Burnout, and Secondary Trauma: https://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html

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Spiritual Self Care

- “You cannot be involved at the depths of the human heart, engaging the realities of people’s lives, without consequences. There will be in some ways a joining of their trauma. [...] You can’t care and be at war for a person without having some level of wounds and scars.” Dan Allender
- “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:12
- In war, you become susceptible to assaults of the enemy
- Must deal with the emotional and spiritual debris

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Spiritual Self Care

- Spiritual/prayer covering
- Spiritual sensitivity and vulnerability
- Cleansing/Cutting free prayer
- Spiritual Direction
- Regular Confessor

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3 Non-negotiables for Self Care

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“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
Matthew 11:28-30

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“I do not believe we can truly enter into our own inner pain and wounds and open our hearts to others unless we have had an experience of God, unless we have been touched by God. We must be touched by the Father in order to experience, as the prodigal son did, that no matter how wounded we may be, we are loved. And not only are we loved, but we too are called to heal and to liberate. This healing power in us will not come from our capacities and our riches, but in and through our poverty. We are called to discover that God can bring peace, compassion and love *through our wounds.*”
Jean Vanier

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Wounds

- Wounds – result of lack of love or not being loved properly and mar our true identity. Instead of seeing our belovedness, we only see our wounds.
- Henri Nouwen put it this way “Life of the Beloved:” “Over the years I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection...When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, ‘Well, that proves again that I am a nobody... Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us ‘the Beloved.’ Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.

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Wounds

- Painful memories are not the problem...they are the containers for the identity lies (Dr. Bob Schuchts). The pain shows us where the wound is, and when we know where the wound is - we can bring those wounds to Jesus for healing.
- Anatomy of a wound
 - Wound
 - Lies
 - Vows
 - Judgments

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Wounds

- If we don't transform our pain, we transmit it
 - We live out of our wounds and the lies around the wound if we don't transform the pain
 - Unhealthy, co-dependent relationships
 - Countertransference
 - Maladaptive Behaviors
 - Bondage

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Lies

- Self
- Others
- God
 - CCC397 Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.
 - CCC399 Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness. They become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image – that of a God jealous of his prerogatives.

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Shame

- Shame Brain
 - Built in negativity bias - Brain is wired to focus on the negative (the caveman survival brain)...can keep us in a loop of shame-isolation-depression
- Shame activates
 - Default Mode Network - When you're not focused on a task, your brain defaults to (cave man brain):
 - What is wrong with you
 - What other people think of you
 - What's wrong with other person
- Pain activation part of brain
 - Shutdown and dissociation
 - Difficult to problem solve

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How to transform the pain

- "Healing is an essential dimension of the apostolic mission and of Christianity. When understood at a sufficiently deep level, this expresses the entire content of redemption" Pope Benedict
- Jesus desires to heal you...do you believe that?
- Move from fear to love
 - Invite Christ into our wounds
 - "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that He who give Himself totally to you may receive you totally" Assisi
 - Whenever we have an encounter with God's love, healing is always occurring.

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How to transform the pain

- "First of all, you have to keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry, and, in the long run, destructive. The world tells you many lies about who you are, and you simply have to be realistic enough to remind yourself of this. Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: "These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief." Henri Nouwen
- Conquer the lies – you have authority by your baptism, by your birthright, by your identity to renounce the lies and to say no to the accuser...but you need to know the truth.

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How to transform the pain

- Prayer life
 - "the real "work" of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me." Henri Nouwen
 - Intimacy with Jesus...and how we begin to know the truth
- Sacraments
 - *"Forgiveness is complete when the love of God has replaced the issue of sin in our life."* Jonathan Hogan (author)
 - Bring lies to confession
- Spiritual Direction
- Look at Jesus
 - And see Him looking at you
- Community – we are wounded in relationships and we are healed in relationship
- Counseling

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