New England MIRECC Peer Education Center
Continuing Education Series

Peer Support Provider—Walking the Tightrope Between Helping Others & Maintaining Your Own Wellness

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Introduction

While the work of helping others in distress is meaningful and can be personally rewarding in many ways, there are inherent challenges to continuously interacting with people who are experiencing significant stressors in their lives. Peer support providers, like other caregivers, need to be aware of stressors commonly associated with the work of a helping role and to take steps to maintain their own wellness in the face of frequently encountered stressors associated with their work.

We have a few comments on the language that will be used in this presentation. Over the past several years, more attention is being paid in both research and professional literature to address stressors associated with the roles of health care providers in various disciplines (ex. nursing, social work, psychology, physicians, etc.) and to address the need for effective self-care management strategies among these providers. Peer support providers, whether volunteers or paid staff, also face similar challenges and, therefore, similarly should ensure they use self-care strategies that help them successfully maintain their own wellness. Although the resources reviewed for this presentation were not written for peer support providers, we have included them because the points have relevance for peer support providers working in health care settings, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities. We will use the term “caregiver” throughout the presentation whenever the discussion refers to points that have relevance for a variety of health care providers, including peer support providers. This presentation has been given to VA peer support providers as well as peer support providers who work in non-VA health care settings. Therefore, we will use the word “consumer” whenever referring to an individual who uses health care services, including peer support services.

Common Stresses in the Work of Caregivers in a Health Care Setting

- Working with people in distress in the role of helper (includes paid caregivers and volunteers).
- Demands of carrying out professional responsibilities—maintaining ethical, professional, and legal standards.
- Varied and often shifting role demands—role conflict and ambiguity.
- Challenge of managing and balancing intimate, confidential, and non-reciprocal nature of caregiver/consumer relationship.
- Utilizing oneself as a person as a therapeutic tool and managing one’s own emotions.
- Need to maintain boundaries and resist boundary intrusions of consumers.
- Interactions between work demands and personal stressors.
- Potential stress from listening to consumers describe their traumatic life experiences.
Compassion Fatigue—Definition

According to Charles Figley (2002), compassion fatigue is a function of bearing witness to the suffering of others. It is a secondary traumatic stress reaction. It is defined as a state of tension and preoccupation with the traumatized consumer by re-experiencing the reported traumatic events, avoidance/numbing of reminders, and/or persistent arousal (e.g., anxiety) associated with the consumer.

Treatment for Compassion Fatigue

- According to Figley (2002), the first step in treating compassion fatigue is to educate the at-risk caregivers. Education is important to help caregivers recognize early warning signs and use preventative care to avoid developing compassion fatigue. An additional benefit is that education helps normalize negative, stressful feelings and experiences that are part of their work. It can help them realize they are not alone in how they feel.

- Talking through the triggering issues with a supervisor or trusted colleague is recommended.

- It is very important to develop and maintain a healthy and strong social support system. Relationships that impose an additional strain and demands on caregivers should be addressed in order to reduce their toxic impact.

Compassion Fatigue & Burnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPASSION FATIGUE</th>
<th>BURNOUT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEFINITION</td>
<td>“Cost of caring” as a helper—manifested as physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion.</td>
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<td>ONSET</td>
<td>Acute—Can occur quickly without warning.</td>
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<td>CAUSE(S)</td>
<td>Tends to be related to traumas experienced by consumers rather than other stressors.</td>
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2. Experience strain of dealing with these stressors. Strain could be emotional exhaustion (psychological); fatigue or headaches (somatic); and family conflicts or substance abuse (behavioral).

3. Defensive coping—Demonstrates changes in attitudes and behaviors such as reduced empathy and concern for consumers, detachment, and blaming consumers for their own situations.

| RECOVERY                  | Quicker recovery than burnout when treated. | May be irreversible. |

**Warning Signs of Compassion Fatigue**

**Cognitive Warning Signs**

- Intrusive thoughts and/or images of consumers’ traumatic situations
- Developing a worldview in terms of victims and perpetrators
- Decreased sense of safety
- Increased suspicion of others
- Decreased trust in others
- Diminished feelings of personal control and freedom
- Feelings of therapeutic impotence/helplessness
- Loss of hope
- Guilt
- Victim-blaming
- Diminished sense of purpose, accomplishment, or enjoyment of work
- Difficulties with attention and concentration
- Increased forgetfulness

*Inspired by recent television shows, Nortel devised a new way to downsize*
Psychological/Emotional Warning Signs

- Increased anger and irritability
- Lower frustration tolerance
- Depression
- Decreased ability to feel joy
- Increased feelings of anxiety
- Feelings of horror or dread
- Inability to maintain balance between empathy and objectivity
- Feeling unappreciated, alienated, and isolated
- Emotional withdrawal from colleagues, friends, and family
- Over-identification with certain consumers
- Marked or increased countertransference issues with certain consumers

Physical Warning Signs

- Chronic fatigue
- Increased somatic complaints (headache, stomach aches, back pain, etc.)
- Increased muscle tension
- Physiological arousal in the form of palpitations and hypervigilance
Behavioral Warning Signs

- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia or oversleeping)
- Workaholism
- Increase in addictive behaviors such as compulsive eating or substance abuse
- Impairment in day-to-day functioning including missed or cancelled appointments
- Decreased use of supervision
- Increased isolation
- Chronic lateness
- Increased absenteeism from work
Stress Reduction Kit

Bang Head Here

Directions:
1. Place kit on FIRM surface.
2. Follow directions in circle of kit.
3. Repeat step 2 as necessary, or until unconscious.
4. If unconscious, cease stress reduction activity.

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Fostering Resilience & Protecting Against Compassion Fatigue

Understand that all caregivers are vulnerable to developing compassion fatigue and other job-related health issues. Make some of the following accommodations accordingly to reduce your own risk.

**Cognitive Strategies**

- Ask yourself, “Would the world fall apart if I step away from my work for a day or a week?”
- Challenge assumptions that stigmatize or devalue caregivers who acknowledge current or past experiences of distress, impairment, or personal pain in their lives.
- Think about the notion that if you never say, “No,” then what is your “Yes” worth?
- Develop reasonable and realistic expectations about your workload, responsibilities, and capabilities.
- Assess your motivations for being a peer support provider. If you give to get, you will be disappointed. Develop realistic expectations about the rewards and limitations of being a peer support provider.

**Psychological/Emotional Strategies**

- Set and keep healthy boundaries with others.
- Do not blame others.
- Do not make any big decisions when you are feeling stressed.
- Make and maintain professional connections that include opportunities to discuss the specific nature and stresses of your work. Model openness in these discussions with colleagues.
- Seek supervision and consultation on a regular basis from colleagues.
- Identify sources of support for your work and use them.
- Spend plenty of quiet time alone for meditating, reflecting, and reconnecting with a spiritual source.
- Have at least one focused, meaningful conversation every day with family or friends.
**Behavioral Strategies**

- Arrive to work on time and leave on time.
- Adhere to a commitment for regularly scheduled time off.
- Ask for help from others for routine work when appropriate.
- Eat sensibly.
- Exercise regularly/engage in a physical activity you find pleasurable.
- Get the amount of sleep you need to feel refreshed every day.
- Balance work with other activities that provide opportunities for growth.

**Boundaries**

Boundaries are involved with how we treat others, how they treat us, and how we treat ourselves. Here are several reasons that it is important to develop and maintain healthy personal boundaries:

- Helps us to know ourselves and what is important and meaningful for each of us as individuals.
- Teaches us to have respect for ourselves and others.
- Teaches us to be responsible for our behavior when interacting with others.
- Helps us to be assertive about our personal needs.
- Helps reduce the chance of being in a situation that could be harmful to us.
- Helps us to be more accepting of others by recognizing their personal boundaries.

Here are practical tips for how to maintain healthy personal boundaries in your work as a peer support provider:

- Arrive to work on time and leave on time.
- Take your allotted breaks.
➢ Do not give out your personal phone number and/or home address to consumers with whom you are working.

➢ Take care not to mix your roles as peer support provider/friend/family member/etc. with people in your life. Example: Do not engage in a personal relationship with a consumer with whom you are working.

➢ Do not take work home with you.

➢ Seek consultation with your supervisor about how to manage challenging situations with consumers or other staff members when you feel uncertain about what to do.

Remember to take time for fun in your life and find something to laugh about as often as possible!!!!
Caregiver Self-Care Assessment

How frequently do you do the following?

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<td>Never</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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Physical Self-Care

_____ Eat regularly (ex. breakfast, lunch, & dinner)
_____ Eat healthy meals
_____ Get regular medical check-ups
_____ Obtain medical care when needed
_____ Take time off to rest and recuperate when you are sick
_____ Get a massage
_____ Exercise/engage in a physical activity you enjoy
_____ Get enough sleep
_____ Take vacations
_____ Other:_______________________________________________

Psychological Self-Care

_____ Take a day trip/mini-vacation
_____ Make time away from your telephone/office
_____ Make time for self-reflection—Listen to your thoughts, beliefs, feelings
_____ Read literature unrelated to your work
_____ Allow others to know different aspects of who you are
_____ Ask others for help/support when you need it
_____ Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes
_____ Try a new activity at which you are not an expert or in charge
_____ Other:__________________________________________________________________________________
### How frequently do you do the following?

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#### Emotional Self-Care

- [ ] Spend time with people whose company you enjoy
- [ ] Stay in contact with important people in your life
- [ ] Provide yourself with praise for your accomplishments
- [ ] Love yourself
- [ ] Find things that make you laugh
- [ ] Allow yourself to cry
- [ ] Make time to play and/or relax
- [ ] Other: ________________________________

#### Spiritual Self-Care

- [ ] Make time for reflection
- [ ] Find a spiritual connection or community
- [ ] Be open to inspiration
- [ ] Cherish your optimism and hope
- [ ] Be open to not having all the answers
- [ ] Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- [ ] Meditate
- [ ] Pray
- [ ] Sing
- [ ] Contribute to causes in which you believe
- [ ] Listen to music
- [ ] Other: ________________________________
How frequently do you do the following?

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**Workplace or Professional Self-Care**

- Take your fully allotted time for lunch/breaks
- Take time to chat with co-workers
- Make quiet time to complete tasks
- Identify projects or tasks that you find exciting and rewarding
- Set limits with colleagues and consumers
- Balance your workload so that no one day or part of a day is “too much”
- Arrange your work space so it is comfortable and comforting for you
- Get regular supervision or consultation
- Have a support group with your peers/colleagues
- Negotiate for your needs (ex. benefits, pay raise, time off)
- Other: ________________________________________________________________

**Balance**

- Make efforts to have balance in your professional life and work day
- Strive to achieve balance among work, family, friends, play, and rest
- Other areas of self-care that are relevant for you: ____________________________

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Have you found you are neglecting yourself in one or more of these areas of self-care? If so, set a goal for an area of self-care you want to improve.

Decide a first step you will take to work on it.

Give yourself a date by which you will complete your first step.

References


Websites for Additional Information

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project: http://www.compassionfatigue.org

http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/What-is-Compassion-Fatigue-Dr-Charles-Figley.html

What is Vicarious Trauma?: http://headington-institute.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2648
Contact Information for New England MIRECC Peer Education Center

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