



**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

	COMPASSION FATIGUE	BURNOUT
DEFINITION	“Cost of caring” as a helper—manifested as physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion.	Emotional exhaustion related to work in a helping role in a healthcare setting.
ONSET	Acute—Can occur quickly without warning.	Occurs gradually.
CAUSE(S)	Tends to be related to traumas experienced by consumers rather than other stressors.	Several causative factors: job strain; fading idealism; and diminishing sense of accomplishment. <u>Burnout generally has three stages:</u> 1. Faced with assorted potential stressors (personal, interpersonal, and organizational).

		<p>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).</p> <p>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.</p>
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

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I DON'T HAVE A BAD ATTITUDE SIR. I ALREADY TOLD YOU THAT WE HAVE OUTSOURCED ALL NON-ESSENTIAL TASKS LIKE BEING EMPATHETIC AND COURTEOUS, SO WE CAN FOCUS ON WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT.



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



"The test results are in. The tightness in your chest and numbness in your extremities are caused by the biking outfit you're wearing."



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



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*"Gentlemen, I've called this meeting
to discuss absenteeism."*



*"Thank goodness you're here—I can't accomplish
anything unless I have a deadline."*

Stress Reduction Kit



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.

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.

Caregiver Self-Care Assessment

How frequently do you do the following?

0 **1** **2** **3**
Never **Rarely** **Sometimes** **Often**

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?

0 **1** **2** **3**
Never **Rarely** **Sometimes** **Often**

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?

0 **1** **2** **3**
Never **Rarely** **Sometimes** **Often**

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: _____
-

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.

(Caregiver Self-Assessment Reference: Saakvitne, K.W., & Pearlman, L.A. (1996). *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.)

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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>

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