

Practice Perspectives

The National
Association of
Social Workers

750 First Street NE

Suite 800

Washington, DC 20002-4241

SocialWorkers.org



Denise Johnson, LCSW-C

Senior Practice Associate

djohnson.nasw@socialworkers.org

A Look at Compassion Fatigue and Resources for Social Workers

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, social workers work diligently to address the growing mental health needs of their patients. While social workers are well equipped to deal with these issues, continued exposure to stress and trauma can have a significant impact. This practice perspective provides an overview of compassion fatigue and helpful resources for social workers.

What is compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is all too common in the helping profession with over 70% of social workers experiencing it to some degree.¹ It is characterized by physical and emotional distress that impacts the ability to deal with one's daily environment. Compassion fatigue is a culmination of secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Secondary traumatic stress, also referred to as vicarious trauma, is stress that results from indirect exposure to trauma such as working with traumatized patients. It is also linked to careers and positions that may regularly place one in stressful situations. Burnout, on the other hand, is regarded as mental and physical exhaustion that can create feelings of frustration and overall work performance or other responsibilities.²

What are the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue?

It's no secret that the current climate has placed pressure on social workers as they continue to meet the needs of their patients in an ever-changing environment. Therefore, it's important for social workers to recognize the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue as it can negatively impact work satisfaction and quality of care. If gone untreated compassion fatigue may also lead to more serious conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, or even chronic substance use.³

Some common signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue include:³

- » Feeling "on edge", angry, irritable
- » Easily overwhelmed by work responsibilities
- » Mental and physical exhaustion
- » Sleeping difficulties
- » Impaired ability to care for patients
- » Decrease in work satisfaction and productivity
- » Disconnect from colleagues
- » Reduced ability to feel sympathy or empathy
- » Pessimistic or cynical attitude
- » Impaired judgement and behavior
- » Apathy and isolation

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How can social worker deal with compassion fatigue?

Fostering resilience is important in combating compassionate fatigue. Resilience is a fundamental skill in social work practice and enables individuals to recover from stress despite challenging times. It allows social workers the ability to maintain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being in stressful situations while compassionately responding to others. Building resiliency also helps social workers demonstrate more self-compassionate, which is another essential quality in dealing with compassion fatigue.

To be resilient, social workers must practice self-care. As helping professionals, social workers are familiar with the importance of self-care. They encourage their patients to establish boundaries, regular routines with healthy eating, sleep hygiene, and physical activity, as well as maintain work life balance. Unfortunately, social workers are not always able to put this into practice for themselves. In 2021 NASW updated the *Code of Ethics* to include self-care in an effort to highlight its significance to competent and ethical social work practice. It states social workers should make efforts towards personal and professional self-care. Additionally, social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers' self-care⁴

While implementing self-care practices can be difficult, some helpful strategies may include:

- » Building self-awareness by recognizing the signs of compassion fatigue
- » Establishing work-life balance by engaging in enjoyable activities and taking time off when possible
- » Developing healthy eating habits and exercising regularly
- » Reducing stress by utilizing relaxation skills such as deep breathing and meditation
- » Maintaining connections to positive social supports such as loved ones, colleagues and setting healthy boundaries
- » Utilizing support from Employee Assistance Programs if needed

Most importantly we should be honest with ourselves. There may be times when the best self-care in the workplace involves finding a different position when the environment is not a good fit.

The following resources provide more information and support for social workers:

Burnout and Self-Care in Social Work: A Guidebook for Students and Those in Mental Health and Related Professions offers strategies for social workers to deal with compassion fatigue and burnout in the workplace.

Compassion Fatigue Assessment Tool is used to help staff recognize the visible and invisible signs of compassion fatigue, investigate the root causes of compassion fatigue, and seek additional help, if necessary.

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project helps to bring awareness of compassion fatigue by providing assessment tools and resources

Compassion Resilience Toolkit for Health and Human Services Leaders and Staff looks at strategies to maintain the provider's well-being when with the distress of patients, colleagues, and loved ones.

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has specific information about Compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress, including assessments, information sheets for families and where to get assistance. The site also offers free expert consultation, education, and resources to Veteran Affairs providers and civilian (community-based) health care professionals treating Veterans.

NASW Social Work Talks Podcast: How Can Social Workers Avoid Job Burnout? In this podcast, SaraKay Smullens, MSW, LCSW, DCSW, CGP, CFLE, BCD, a certified group psychotherapist and family life educator, and author of "Burnout and Self-Care in Social Work," speaks about how social workers can prevent burnout at work and in their lives overall.

NASW Social Work Talks Podcast: Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout Kristen Lee, EdD, LICSW, is a professor of Behavioral Science at Northeastern University speaks about her area of expertise: preventing and treating burnout.

The Network for Social Work Management, Self-Care Toolkit. This toolkit contains multiple tools to evaluate stress levels, foster resilience, and improve self-care.

Self-Care in Social Work: A Guide for Practitioners, Supervisors, and Administrators. This book is a guide to promote effective self-care tailored to the needs of social workers, including both individual and organizational approaches.

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