

Practice Perspectives

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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