

Remembering and Compassion Fatigue

Over the past year, since September 11, 2001, many Americans offered help to those affected by the terrorist attacks. We’ve also seen young men and women go to war, to help defend the world from terrorism. The past year has seen a new sense of patriotism emerge in our country and many of us have re-evaluated our priorities and renewed commitments to help others.

We learned last year that helping sometimes comes with an emotional cost. We now have a sense of the effort that will be needed to defeat terrorism. To meet the need, many Americans continue to reach out to help others – with time, money, and commitment.

It’s possible that many of us have experienced “compassion fatigue,” the emotional cost of providing help to the victims of trauma. Take this anniversary as an opportunity to recall the signs and symptoms, published by the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health, that you are fast approaching the limits of your emotional tolerance.

Physical	Cognitive	Behavioral	Emotional
Fatigue or weakness	Blaming someone	Withdrawal	Anxiety
Nausea or vomiting	Uncertainty	Suspiciousness	Guilt
Chest pain	Uncontrolled emotions	Change in appetite	Grief
Muscle twitches	Depression	Increased alcohol use	Agitated
Difficulty breathing	Inappropriate emotions	Inability to sleep or rest	Emotional shock
Dizziness or fainting	Confusion	Nightmares	Hopeless
Elevated blood pressure	Poor attention	Disturbed thinking	Helpless
Rapid heart rate	Memory problems	Loss of time	Intense anger
Grinding teeth	Disorientation	Pacing	Irritable
Sweating or chills	Change in alertness	Easily startled	Fear and uncertainty

When considering this list of signs, we might downplay how we feel now, only to notice one or more of these symptoms later. Sometimes we don’t make the connection between how we feel or think and what’s going on around us. Acknowledging that we cannot escape some form of stress when we help others, helps us deal with our personal reaction, whatever form it takes.

Once recognized, how do we treat compassion fatigue? First, understand that this is not the same as burnout. Day-to-day stress and frustration at work causes burnout, and its cure usually involves a change of job or time away from work. Compassion fatigue leads to preoccupation with the trauma and, if left unresolved, can result in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As time goes by, continued exposure to reminders of the event may worsen symptoms. On the other hand, commemorating, talking, and journaling may, in time, help many individuals reach some

sense of acceptance and closure. For others, acceptance and closure are more difficult to achieve. Some people may need professional help.

Remember to see a physician for any physical symptoms that last more than a day – for chest pains or other serious symptoms, seek medical help immediately. Even if you think that your symptoms are part of an emotional reaction, remember that our emotions have a *direct impact* on our bodies. See a doctor.

Maintain your routine as much as possible. Minimize the disruption by eating nutritious meals and getting plenty of rest. Take breaks. Keep busy with a variety of activities, including some that will distract you from continuous reminders of last year's events.

Talk with a trusted family member or friend about your feelings of sadness, fear or anger. Sometimes we find ourselves feeling resentful about the changes we are making or have made in our lives. Tell yourself that these feelings are perfectly normal and understandable. Seek professional help for emotions that overwhelm you or that stop you from functioning at home or work.

Compassion fatigue will affect each of us to some extent. The more direct our involvement with last year's rescue or support efforts, the greater the risk of experiencing a re-emergence of feelings that affected us then. Yet each of us involved in helping, in whatever form that help takes, need to stay alert to the signs of ongoing compassion fatigue.