

# Is it Compassion Fatigue or Empathy Burnout?

Learn the differences between compassion fatigue and empathy burnout, how they each impact healthcare workers, and how to begin treatment.



Compassion fatigue and empathy burnout for health care workers can be similar and can occur for anyone working with individuals who are experiencing physical and/or emotional stress. Compassion is the showing of kindness and willingness to help others during times of stressful events, conditions, or situations. It's when a person cares enough about the other person's experiences and feeling that they want to help.

## Definitions

Compassion and empathy have similarities, but the difference is that compassion is the ability to feel for another person while "empathy is the ability to not only understand another's feelings but also to become one with that person's distress." It is observing or imagining another person's distress and having it evoke the same feeling in the observer.

## Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a normal result of chronic stress resulting from caregiving for people we feel compassion for. Some caregivers are more prone to fatigue than others. Strong identification with the suffering of the people receiving support is a primary reason people take on caregiver roles. Some people are taught from an early age to help other people before they help themselves and can even feel guilty when they are addressing their own needs. You don't need to have an official role as a caregiver to experience compassion fatigue, especially in this time of crisis when we all worry about our loved ones.

## Empathy Burnout

Empathy burnout goes deeper than compassion fatigue, as it runs simultaneously with one's own past wounds being re-triggered by the circumstances, traumas, and pain of others. It results in the healthcare worker feeling less able to offer support because they feel the pain themselves so acutely.

## Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Some of the symptoms of compassion fatigue are:

- Excessive blaming
- Bottled up emotions
- Isolation from others
- Receives unusual amount of complaints from others
- Voices excessive complaints about work functions
- Substance abuse used to mask feelings
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling, sexual addiction
- Poor self-care
- Legal problems
- Reoccurrence of nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic event
- Chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems or colds
- Sadness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mentally and physically tired
- Preoccupied
- In denial about problems

When caregivers become aware that they are prone to compassion fatigue or are already exhibiting these symptoms, this realization can lead to thoughts about past trauma, pain, and suffering in their own lives. Too many people try to stuff their own feelings away and try to keep working in a “business as usual” approach. This reaction can easily lead to crisis.

## Treatment for Compassion Fatigue

Positive self-care to avoid crisis:

- Be kind to yourself
- Take personal time and breaks
- Educate yourself to understand your reactions
- Accept where you are in your own journey
- Know that the people who are close to you may not always be available to help you cope
- Talk things over your feelings and thoughts with people who can validate you
- Listen to others who have had similar experiences
- Be sure to set boundaries in your work and caregiving relationships
- Express your needs out loud



Being proactive in addressing your needs is healing. Setting limits and boundaries can help prevent debilitating compassion fatigue. Make sure to work on your own life outside of your caregiver role. For some people, establishing specific rituals or routines that separate their work from their personal time can be helpful. They can take a walk, ride a bike, talk about non-work or other subjects that they personally are interested in or enjoy.

## Practical Steps to Avoid Empathy Burnout

Empathy burnout is common when individuals spend so much of their emotional strength relating deeply to the problems and stress of others that they forget to care for themselves. “A high level of empathy is good, but without conscious skills to deal with it can lead you to empathy burnout.” It is emotionally exhausting and can result in a withdrawal from caring or feeling empathy for others.

If the person in the caring role can recognize this tendency, there are some practical steps that they can take.

### Shift thinking about empathy from a feeling to a skill

- The skill of empathy can help others while maintaining sufficient self-awareness to avoid burnout.
- Be aware of self-care, this will enable the person to provide on-going support.

### Set clear boundaries

- The individual should set clear boundaries for what they are willing to do and what they are not willing not do.
- This helps to set clear boundaries for what the other person can expect.

### Don't take things personally

- People should not become “personally” invested in the other person's problems.
- They should remember that even if they can feel the other person's feeling it doesn't mean that it is about them.

### Believe that others can save themselves

- Provide support emotionally but know that only the individual experiencing problems can overcome them.
- It is wrong for the individual providing assistance to assume that you know the answers better than the person you are empathizing with.
- Assist the other person in figuring out the solutions but do not become the solution.

Through conscious thought, empathy burnout is something you can avoid. Remember to think of empathy as a skill that you can practice when appropriate and set aside when it is not or when it becomes overwhelming. Empathy is a great thing for the caring person and for others when it is experienced consciously.

There are some simple tests that you can take that will help you increase your self-awareness as a caregiver:

- [Professional Quality of Life Measure](#)
- [Life Stress Test](#)
- [Empath Test](#)

Adapted from Mental Health America