












What are Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma?

Compassion fatigue is the phenomenon in which professionals in roles that deal with traumatised individuals can develop. The roles that these professionals are in requires extreme levels of patience and empathy, which makes them highly skilled within their professional lives but can emotionally drain them to the point of fatigue. It should be noted that this ailment is developed over a long period of time, and there is a distinct difference between being empathetic and compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue impacts the daily life of the professional and leaves them unable to work in the same way as before.

Vicarious Trauma is often linked with compassion fatigue and some people use the two terms interchangeably. When describing vicarious trauma, other details are added to the list from compassion fatigue such as: experiencing some level of trauma due to the traumatic events recounted by their clients, unpleasant and traumatic thoughts consuming them, flashbacks, lowered mental health, as well as feeling helpless. It is generally described to be like having PTSD symptoms from a trauma they themselves have not experienced.

Some signs of Compassion Fatigue

-  Feelings of helplessness and/or powerlessness in the face of patient suffering
-  Reduced feelings of empathy and sensitivity
-  Feeling detached, numb and emotionally disconnected
-  Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
-  Increased anxiety, sadness, anger and irritability
-  Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
-  Difficulty sleeping and sleep disturbances like nightmares
-  Physical symptoms like headaches, nausea, upset stomach and dizziness
-  Neglect of your own self-care, withdrawal and self-isolation
-  Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work demands
-  Increased conflict in personal relationships



One Minute Guide

Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma

August 2023

Who is most at risk of developing them?

Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma impact a wide range of caregivers and professions. It is most common among professionals who work in a healing or helping capacity. Some of the professions more prone to them are:

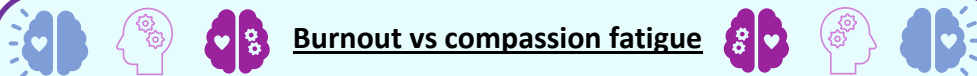
- ❖ Therapists
- ❖ Medical professionals
- ❖ First responders
- ❖ Teachers
- ❖ Legal professionals



Some signs of Vicarious Trauma

It is important to keep in mind that a lot of the symptoms for compassion fatigue cross over into signs of vicarious trauma.

-  Experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness about patient's victimisation
-  Becoming overly involved emotionally with the patient
-  Experiencing bystander guilt, shame, feelings of self-doubt
-  Being preoccupied with thoughts of patients outside of the work situation
-  Over identification with the patient (having horror and rescue fantasies)
-  Loss of hope, feelings of pessimism and cynicism
-  Distancing, numbing, detachment, cutting patients off, staying busy. Avoiding listening to client's story of traumatic experiences
-  Difficulty in maintaining professional boundaries with the client, such as overextending self (trying to do more than is in the role to help the patient).



Burnout vs compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a recent discovery into mental health, and before it's arrival in the 90s it was mislabelled as burnout. This was problematic in several ways, as although the two conditions share some side effects, the root cause and treatment for the conditions are separate. Burnout is usually caused through extreme prolonged stress or unbearable work conditions. Through changing jobs, most sufferers tend to improve.

As compassion fatigue is linked with caregiving or helping roles, it is often the case that the professional cares so deeply about their clients and work that the fatigue stems from extreme empathy. It is not the fact that they hate their job or find the conditions in the workplace unbearable, but the content that they are faced with, and the empathy needed in order to both listen and help the clients in their trauma.

Treatment options for vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue

As mentioned before, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma were classified as a type of burnout until recently, however they differ drastically in the effective treatments. Burnout is usually resolved by time off work or by changing jobs, however with vicarious trauma the trauma felt by the professionals often transfers into their daily life and can impact their life outside of work. An example of this being if the professional were to go past a place in which one of their clients was attacked; they would feel the trauma and unexpected thoughts/emotions whether they were at work or not.

The main treatment for both compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma is therapy: this allows them to safely work through the emotions. Studies show that self-awareness is a key aspect in treating them as if they are aware of how they are feeling, and which stage they feel they are in they can ensure the most effective support in the workplace. Self-care is a crucial part of the recovery.

Some professionals may feel the need to take time off of work during this time of healing, however if managed well, many professionals are able to return to work.

The stages of compassion fatigue

There are said to be four main stages of compassion fatigue: ranging from zealot where the professional is excited and ready to perform, all the way to zombie in which they are no longer able to cope with their day-to-day work and lifestyle.

The Zealot

When you enter the profession, your enthusiasm and excitement to perform the job mark the first phase in your compassion fatigue cycle—The Zealot. Your unyielding passion and zest for the role can cause you to take too much on, thus starting the journey to fatigue.

Irritability

It manifests as feelings of cynicism. You may feel like work is not entirely as you expected it would be. Feelings that you are not doing the best for those you originally wanted to help may emerge in this phase and you begin to question your career path.

Withdrawal

Here, we experience feelings of decreased job satisfaction, disappointment, frustration and even guilt. You may experience detachment from the role in this phase of the cycle.

Zombie

The final phase is known as Zombie. Here, you may experience an inability to cope with work stressors healthily; you may feel angry or resentful; you may even be questioning your career entirely or even consider leaving the industry.

Key Contacts and Further Information

[Coventry Safeguarding Adult Board](#)

[Mind vicarious trauma guidance](#)

[BMA vicarious trauma](#)

[Amy Cunningham on vicarious trauma](#)

