

When I can't care less ...



You couldn't care less if you tried, you say. You have nothing more to give to other people, absolutely nothing. You wish they will just leave you alone.

"Usually I am the go-to person for those in need, learners, colleagues, friends and family," you explain. "But now I am all out of compassion, and this at a time when more and more people around me are suffering from loss and despair".

"I really care about me not caring anymore. How did I become this care-less?"

Actually there is a name for this feeling you are having: *compassion fatigue*.

The standard definition of compassion fatigue relates to what health and care workers experience as a result of prolonged dealing with other people's trauma day in and day out. The result of this occupational hazard is physical and psychological pain.

However the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have put many people in other service professions at risk of this condition. But unlike health professionals who are trained to manage transference and counter-transference in their relationships with patients and still fall foul of compassion fatigue, teachers (and hair stylists I have observed), are not explicitly taught skills of professional detachment and psychological boundaries.

Compassion fatigue is not the same as burnout although, as with burnout, it leaves the individual physically and emotionally exhausted and affects productivity and workplace and personal well-being.

In this case, the debilitating fatigue comes with feelings of being burdened by other people's suffering, leading to a lack of sympathy and empathy or that not-caring feeling. When caring for another undermines our self-care, our ability or motivation to empathise with another wanes. Compassion fatigue is the burden of caring too much. Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue has a rapid onset but it also has a quicker recovery time, if identified early enough.

Sufferers typically go through four phases:

SELF-CARE SKILLS FOR TEACHERS

1. **Zealot or idealistic phase** – We start off all enthusiastic, dedicated and ready to make a difference even if it requires working long hours and going beyond what is expected. Remember that feeling? This can be when starting a new job, taking up a new position at school or dealing with a new challenge like the pandemic.
2. **Withdrawal phase** – But as time goes by, we get tired, our enthusiasm wanes and our levels of life satisfaction decreases. We start whinging, we dread going to work or even talking about it. We feel tired all the time and too drained to get daily chores done. We withdraw from family, friends and colleagues.
3. **Irritability phase** – As time goes by, detachment morphs into active avoidance of others at home and in the workplace. People start irritating us, we are impatient and experience others as energy vampires. We might even start blaming people for their own suffering. We become more and more withdrawn and cheerless.
4. **Zombie phase** – By now our irritability is a desperate rage which we turn onto colleagues but also our nearest and dearest and ourselves. We no longer just avoid others, we start despising them. To cope we adopt negative behaviours like overeating, excessive social media consumption, even alcohol and drug abuse. It affects our sleeping patterns and self-care as well as our ability to concentrate. This affects our work and our own attitude to our work. Research has shown that burnout and compassion fatigue are associated with making more mistakes, even unprofessional conduct and self-serving². The upshot is immense personal and professional turmoil for the individual including feelings of low self-worth, depression, anxiety, anger and confusion.

How do I stop a zombie-future for myself? Well the usual self-care habits such as looking after your physical, mental and emotional health, applies. Eat well, hydrate, sleep well, manage stress etc. But compassion fatigue requires more from us. We need to do these things to build resilience and avoid turning into a zombie:

- **Nurture the self** – Self-awareness and self-monitoring is key to spot changes in your mood, feelings, behaviour, attitudes to people, work and life in general. Pay attention to your own needs rather than putting everyone else's before your own. Don't rely on others to make you happy or take away your hurt. But more importantly don't think you are responsible for diminishing their distress either. Caring means to stand in solidarity, not to absorb another's pain and carry their burden. Setting healthy boundaries is the most effective way to protect personal and professional wellbeing.
- **Adopt a detached attitude** – Being detached is not the same as isolating yourself or hiding from realities. It means caring enough about others to allow them to have their own lived experience. It means not wanting to lessen your own hurt and control your own discomfort by controlling their emotions and discomfort. Typically the fixer reasons: "If I can make you feel better, I will feel better". We can't. We all have to experience our own emotions. You can be there for another person without taking any action or saying anything. Being detached also means you take a break from work and your colleagues. Do not let feelings of guilt prevent you from disengaging from others when you are not up to their demands for care.
- **Must social support** – There is a reason why the helping professions rely on informal and formal supervisory and mentor relationships. Support acts as a buffer and a source of resilience. The support of a friend or colleague with whom you can share feelings and fears is one of the most important ways to counteract compassion fatigue. Reach out for social interaction, emotional support, advice, assistance and encouragement.

Supporting a friend or colleague with a chat over coffee is many a woman's superpower. Men have their own versions of this, probably involving beer or sporting events I imagine. Whichever it is, freely sharing our superpowers is crucial for creating a caring society. But we should also be strong enough to receive compassion from ourselves and to ask it from others.

Keep well and enjoy your holiday

Erika

WhatsApp 082 824 0642

www.somasense.co.za



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