

Compassion Fatigue/ Burnout/ Self-Care

1. Take Stock-What's on your plate?

You can't aim to make changes and improvements without truly knowing where the problem areas are. Start by taking a nonjudgmental inventory of where things are at in your life. Make a list of all the demands on your time and energy (Work, Family, Home, Health, Volunteering, other).

Try to make this list as detailed as you can.

Under the Work category, list the main stressors you see (number of clients, or, amount of paperwork, or difficult boss, etc). Once you have the list, take a look at it. What stands out? What factors are contributing to making your plate too full? Life situations or things you have taken on? What would you like to change most?

2. Start a Self-Care Idea Collection

This can be fun. You can do it with friends and at work.

With friends:

Over a cup of coffee, interview three friends on their favourite self-care strategies. Start making a list even if they are not ideas that you would do/are able to afford at the moment. Something new might emerge that you had not yet thought of.

At work:

If you are doing this at work, you could even start a contest for the best self-care idea of the week or have a "self-care board" where people post their favourite ideas. You could have a "5 minutes of self-care" at each staff meeting, where someone is in charge of bringing a new self-care idea each week.

Once you have a really nice long list, pick three ideas that jump out at you. Make a commitment to implementing these in your life within the next

month. Ask a friend/colleague if they would commit to supporting you (and you them) in maintaining yourself care goals. This could mean that they go to the gym with you every Thursday, or that they email you at lunch to remind you to get out of your office. This is a wonderful way to stay on track and to validate your own experiences by sharing them.

3. Find time for yourself every day – Rebalance your workload

Do you work straight through lunch? Do you spend weekends running errands and catching up on your week without ever having 20 minutes to sit on the couch and do nothing? Can you think of simple ways to take mini breaks during a workday? This could simply be that you bring your favorite coffee cup to work and have a ritual at lunch where you close your door (if you have a door) and listen to 10 minutes of your favorite music. A friend of mine has a nap on her yoga mat at work during her lunch break. What would work for you? Not everyone has control over their caseload, but many of us do, providing we see all the clients that need to be seen. Would there be a way for you to rejig your load so that you don't see the most challenging clients all in a row? Make sure you do one nourishing activity each day. This could be having a 30 minute bath with no one bothering you, going out to a movie, or it could simply mean taking 10 minutes during a quiet time to sit and relax. Don't wait until all the dishes are done and the counter is clean to take time off. Take it when you can and make the most of it. Even small changes can make a difference in a busy helper's life.

4. Delegate - learn to ask for help at home and at work

Here is a home-based example: Have you ever taught a 4 year old how to make a sandwich? How long would it take you to make the same sandwich? Yes, you would likely make it in far less time and cause far less mess in the kitchen, but at the end of the day, that four year old will grow into a helpful 10 year old, and one day, you won't have to supervise the sandwich making anymore. Are there things that you are willing to let go of and let others do their own way? Don't expect others to read your mind: consider holding a regular family meeting to review the workload and discuss new options.

5. Have a transition from work to home

Do you have a transition time between work and home? Do you have a 20 minute walk home through a beautiful park or are you stuck in traffic for two hours? Do you walk in the door to kids fighting and hanging from the curtains or do you walk into a peaceful house? Do you have a transition process when you get home? Do you change clothes? Helpers have told us that one of their best strategies involved a transition ritual of some kind: putting on cozy clothes when getting home and mindfully putting their work clothes “away” as in putting the day away as well, having a 10 minute quiet period to shift gears, going for a run.

6. Learn to say no (or yes) more often

Helpers are often attracted to the field because they are naturally giving to others, they may also have been raised in a family where they were expected to be the strong supportive one, the parental child etc. Are you the person who ends up on all the committees at work? Are you on work related boards? Do you volunteer in the helping field as well as work in it? Are you the crisis/support line to your friends and family? It can be draining to be the source of all help for all people. As helpers, we know that learning to say no is fraught with self-esteem and other personal issues and triggers. Do you think you are good at setting limits? If not, this is something that needs exploring, perhaps with a counsellor. Can you think of one thing you could do to say no a bit more often? Conversely, maybe you have stopped saying yes to all requests, because you are feeling so depleted and burned down, feel resentful and taken for granted. Have you stopped saying yes to friends, to new opportunities?

Take a moment to reflect on this question and see where you fit best: Do you need to learn to say no or yes more often?

7. Assess your Trauma Inputs

Do you work with clients who have experienced trauma? Do you read about, see photos of, and are generally exposed to difficult stories and images at your work?

Take a trauma input survey of a typical day in your life.

Starting at home, what does your day begin with? Watching morning news on tv? Listening to the radio or reading the paper? Note how many disturbing images, difficult stories, actual images of dead or maimed people you come across.

Now look at your work. Not counting direct client work, how many difficult stories do you hear, whether it be in a case conference, around the water cooler debriefing a colleague or reading files?

Now look at your return trip home. Do you listen to the news on the radio? Do you watch tv at night? What do you watch? If you have a spouse who is also in the helping field, do you talk shop and debrief each other?

It is important to recognize the amount of trauma information that we unconsciously absorb during the course of a day. Many helpers whom we meet say that they are unable to watch much of anything on television anymore, other than perhaps the cooking channel. Others say the reverse, that they are so desensitized that they will watch very violent movies and shows and feel numb when others around them are clearly disturbed by it. In a nutshell, there is a lot of extra trauma input outside of client work that we do not necessarily need to absorb or to hear about. We can create a “trauma filter” to protect ourselves from this extraneous material.