

HELP FOR THE HELPER



So, you're a volunteer? Perhaps you work within an organization where people have an illness or disability, or are victims of crime. Perhaps you help people who are experiencing distress or suffering loss. This means you are at risk of **compassion fatigue**.

Compassion fatigue is the wearing down of compassion or the ability to care over a period of time. It is what happens when the stories and experiences of the people you are volunteering with become overwhelming. Add to this the stresses of your own personal life and the expectations of the organization you volunteer for, and the results can be:

- Exhaustion, both mental and physical
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, inability to sleep
- Emotional symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, a feeling of 'why bother', anger, frustration, bottling up of emotions

Compassion fatigue is a normal consequence of the volunteer role you have. It is not a medical diagnosis, but a set of signs and symptoms that you can choose to do something about. There is no 'one size fits all' solution to compassion fatigue; this is about you looking at your volunteering role and personal life, working out what action you CAN take, and then deciding what action you WILL take.

The first step is to work out what you are in control of—the things you can change. They include:

- Self-awareness of how you respond to stress
- Health, diet, exercise
- Attitude to those around you
- Training, education and skills
- Boundaries between volunteering and home
- Support and supervision
- How close you get to the people you support (taking their story home with you)

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There are also things that are less likely to be in your control, but you are in control of how you choose to deal with them. These include:

- The experiences/distress/attitude to their illness of the people you support
- Your fellow volunteers and supervisors
- Organizational priorities and systems
- The life stuff that gets in the way (sports, midterms, family problems etc.)

Action you can take

- Get GOOD supervision. Supervision is key in protecting yourself from compassion fatigue. Having the opportunity to de-brief and talk through your experiences is key. Peer supervision, where volunteer colleagues spend protected time talking through difficult or challenging cases in a non-judgmental way, is a brilliant way of fostering a supportive environment. The organization you volunteer with should have procedures in place for support and supervision - make use of them.
- Make some time for you. What makes you happy? When was the last time you had some fun? Spend time with family and friends who make you smile and give you energy. Try to stay away from the people who suck all the life and energy out of you. The best volunteers spend time doing things for themselves as well as other people.
- Learn to say 'No' (practice in the mirror). Are you the person at school or volunteering who is the 'go-to' person every time something needs doing? How does that make you feel? How can you learn to say no better?

By taking action to change the things that are in your control and dealing differently with the things that are outside of your control, you can strengthen your resilience, increase your role satisfaction, and create better boundaries when supporting people, which will ultimately protect you from compassion fatigue.

Don't confuse a tough choice with no choice. Help is available to deal with compassion fatigue.

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