

Compassion Fatigue (CF): refers to the profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professions and caregivers can develop over the course of their careers. “It is a gradual erosion of all things that keep us connected to others in our caregiving role; our empathy, our hope and of course – our compassion – for others and ourselves”.

Compassion fatigue is an emotional pain. It affects us personally and professionally. Personally, we may be more short-tempered with our loved ones and experience an “empty tank” more frequently and more intensely. Professionally, we may feel dispirited, an increase in bitterness and toxicity in the work environment. Additionally, we may contribute to the toxic environment and are prone to making errors in client care.

EXAMPLE: *You are interviewing a new client and taking the abuse history of the client. You notice at the completion of the historical that you did not feel connected to the story and you thought “just another kid in the system”*

You are sitting with a few coworkers at lunch and one is talking excitedly about their upcoming two-week vacation. You mumble to your coworker next to you, “must be nice to have so much time off, too bad the rest of us have to work harder so she can vacation”.

Vicarious Trauma (VT): this term was developed by Laurie Anne Pearlman and Karen Saakvitne to describe the profound shift that workers experience in their world view when they work with clients who have experienced trauma. VT is a *cumulative* process. Mathieu notes, “we are not referring to the most difficult story you have ever heard; we are talking about the *thousands* of stories you don't even remember hearing”.

With vicarious trauma, helpers notice that their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged because of being repeatedly exposed to trauma. *This where the loss of assumption of good intent is most profound.* Helpers may experience intrusive images or nightmares about stories they have heard. You may also experience a pendulum swing of emotions; at times feeling numb and others feeling profoundly angry, sad or unjust.

EXAMPLE: *You see a little girl walking away from a playground holding the hand of an older man. Your first thought is “is he taking her?”. You watch and overhear her call him ‘dad’.*

Your boss sends you an email asking to speak with you in his office. You immediately feel anxious and think “oh great, he’s going to tell me how I screwed up again!”. In the meeting, he tells you he received some positive feedback from a family he wanted to share with you.

Secondary Trauma (ST): refers to the bearing witness of another's direct trauma. While first responders have the most exposure to secondary trauma incidents, we can experience secondary trauma by hearing clients recount very explicit details of the traumas they have endured. Additionally, secondary trauma can occur by watching or hearing testimonies, graphic news footage, and/or case files. Helpers can develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms from secondary trauma exposure such as nightmares/intrusive thoughts about the event, avoidance of things/situations related to the event, chronic tension/irritability, difficulty concentrating and insomnia.

EXAMPLE: *September 11th, 2001: The images you saw on the television screen, the feelings you had bearing witness to the event.*

Burnout: VT, CF & Burnout are often lumped together and/or confused with one another. And while they are closely related, and while burnout can contribute to VT & CF – it is different. Burnout describes the physical and emotional exhaustion a helper feels when they have low job satisfaction, feel powerless and overwhelmed in their place of work. However, burnout does not fundamentally change a helper's world view or that we have lost the ability to feel compassion. In short, burnout is something you can recover from with a change in lifestyle, practice, awareness and rest whereas VT and CF are shifts in your foundation as a helper and person in the world. Not treating burnout can/will lead to compassion fatigue. Additionally, burnout can occur in any area of work, not just the helping field.

EXAMPLE: *You have been feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with your work. You feel like you are working harder than most of your clients and hopeless that they are making any real change. You talk about these feelings with your supervisor and agree that it's probably time for a break. You are able to take some vacation time where you focus on resting your mind and you come back feeling refreshed and ready to meet with your clients again.*