

Compassion Fatigue and Attorneys: You know it Exists so what is your Self Care Plan?

By Christie Sprowls Psy.D

When Jack became an attorney he had aspirations of becoming a change agent for society, and for years fought tirelessly for those who sought his counsel. He had always been dedicated and energetic. Now he finds himself tired, cynical, anxious and lonely. He's angry at his firm for forcing him to see more clients and bill more hours. He is annoyed with what he perceives as his clients increasingly entitled and demanding natures. Although his relationships with his clients once gave him great satisfaction, he now feels depleted by the thought of facing another day responding to their needs. Personal relationships that once were a source of pleasure now only increase his sense of despondency and isolation.

Jack has a form of Compassion Fatigue, also know as Burnout or Secondary Traumatic Stress. It manifests itself as a deep spiritual, physical and emotional exhaustion that results from long term, cumulative stress in work situations that are emotionally demanding. It has also been defined as a form of depression.

Attorneys who have experienced Compassion Fatigue describe it as being caught in a downward spiral that slowly pulls them deeper into their feelings of despair and apathy. In an attempt to stop the decline, they work harder and continue to give to others, finding it increasingly difficult to maintain empathy, objectivity and a healthy work-life balance. Working hard becomes a coping strategy that allows them to ignore what they are feeling. This, of course, only perpetuates the decline.

### **Compassion Fatigue in Attorneys**

The practice of law is by its very nature conflict driven. Attorneys are contacted when people have a problem they cannot fix themselves. To best represent their clients, attorneys develop the skill to anticipate everything that can go wrong and to look for the worst case scenario in every possible situation. "In law pessimism is considered prudence" (Seligman; 2007).

Attorneys contend with the strong emotions inherent in divorce and custody battles; potential loss or gain in liability and commercial cases; imprisonment and death in criminal law; and, the extended vulnerability of offering opinions and consultation. As attorneys rise to the challenge and meet the initiative to provide basic legal services for returning veterans, they may find themselves exposed to atrocities of war. The level of stress in these types of cases can be extreme.

Attorneys are taught to be aggressive and strong; to remain distant and objective; and to bury their emotions. Showing emotion can be a sign of being unprofessional, so attorneys are reticent to deal with their response to the stress and the emotions that surface. It is no surprise that current research indicates that a growing number of

attorneys are exhibiting a high rate of Compassion Fatigue (St. Petersburg Bar Association Magazine, 2006, Levin, et al, 2003).

Attorneys are now ranked number 1 on the list of occupations that are most depressed (Johns Hopkins University, 1990). One in four exhibited symptoms of clinical depression. One in five is an alcoholic. Approximately one in ten contemplate suicide at least once each month, and suicide currently ranks as one of the leading causes of premature death in the legal profession (North Carolina Bar Association, 1991).

### **Warning Signs of Compassion Fatigue**

Although symptoms vary, and the list is not exhaustive, the following may indicate that you are experiencing Compassion Fatigue.

- Abusing drugs, alcohol or food
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Blaming others
- Chronic lateness
- Depression
- Diminished sense of personal accomplishment
- Exhaustion, physical or emotional
- Frequent headaches
- Gastrointestinal complaints
- High self-expectations
- Hopelessness
- Hypertension
- Hypervigilance
- Inability to maintain balance of empathy and objectivity
- Increased irritability
- Increased Startle Response (jump at the slam of a door)
- Isolation
- Intrusive thoughts
- Less ability to feel joy
- Low self-esteem
- Not wanting to answer the phone
- Perfectionism
- Pessimism
- Sleep disturbances
- Workaholism

These symptoms can become chronic and can last for weeks, months or years, leaving many to question whether or not they can continue to practice law. If any of these sound familiar and you would like to assess yourself, there is a free self assessment for

Compassion Fatigue which can be found at <http://www.isu.edu/~bstamm>.

## **Prevention**

The good news is that Compassion Fatigue and Burnout can be prevented, and there are things you can do for yourself. The first strategy is to develop your own self-care plan. Determine how you want to spend your time and what you need to do to re-establish work-life balance. The lifestyle changes you choose to make will depend on your unique circumstances, but the following list can help you to prevent Compassion Fatigue or can start you on the path to recovery.

**1. Start your day with quiet time.** Rather than jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, spend five to fifteen minutes of quiet time. Pray, meditate, do gentle stretches, set an intention for how you would like your day to go, or read something that inspires you. Take five minutes to ask yourself what it is you most need that day.

**2. Replenish yourself daily.** Simple changes such as eating healthier and sleeping seven to nine hours can benefit both your psyche and your physical body. A regular exercise regimen can reduce stress, help you achieve work life balance and re-energize you. What reenergizes you of course will be unique to you. It might be a walk in nature, playing an instrument, gardening or playing with your dog.

**3. Connect with someone daily.** Time with family and close friends nurtures you like nothing else and is frequently the first thing to go when time is scarce. Choose someone in your office who you trust and debrief your cases with them regularly.

**4. Set boundaries.** Decide what you really want to do with your time. Learn how to say “NO.” Remind yourself that you need and deserve time to do what you truly want to do, including doing nothing.

**5. Unplug.** Set a time in your household where you and your family agree to completely disconnect from technology. This means everything: computer, phone, TV. Read, play games with your family, talk with them, take a walk, look at the stars. There are infinite possibilities that will make you feel more alive and connected.

**6. Cultivate your creativity.** Creativity is a potent antidote to Compassion Fatigue. Try something new or re-engage in the hobby that you once loved, but have stopped doing. Painting, pottery or growing a garden provides a sense of accomplishment and completion, which can be difficult to achieve at work.

**7. Learn to manage stress.** When you are in the throws of Compassion Fatigue, you may feel helpless and unable to change. Change is indeed difficult, but it is possible. Learn a range of techniques to combat stress, such as stress management classes, acupuncture, biofeedback, coaching for work-life balance, or work with a psychologist to help you to learn stress management techniques and how to implement them.

**8. Get Support.** Many attorneys feel guilty about focusing on work-life balance due to the belief that time away from work is unproductive. Every attorney I have worked with who committed to set aside the necessary time to change their lifestyle, reported being able to better manage their time, increase productivity, feel more alive, refreshed and relaxed.

**9. Go on a wellness retreat.** Retreats can be replenishing, fun, informative and adventurous. Taking time out from a punishing schedule can help jumpstart your transition to new behaviors.

**10. Laugh.** When is the last time you laughed out loud? There are funny movies, books and comedy clubs. Find out what makes you laugh, and do it.

Invest in yourself. Develop your self care plan today and begin your journey to experience greater life balance and enhanced physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

There are varying levels of Compassion Fatigue. If you find that your self care strategies are not enough to lift your mood, please seek additional support.

#### **Where to Find Help**

**Texas Lawyers Assistance Program.** Please call 1-800-343-8527 to speak to a TLAP staff member.

#### **Suggested Reading**

The Truth About Burnout. Maslach C, Leiter MP. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1997.

Compassion Fatigue: Coping With Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized. Figley CR, ed. New York: Brunner/Mazel; 1995.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life. Kabat-Zinn J. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation. Nhat Hanh T. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

Dr. Christie Sprowls is a Psychologist and an Executive Coach. She is in independent practice in Austin, Texas. Dr. Sprowls travels globally speaking, training, conducting work-life balance workshops and wellness retreats. She provides individual and group coaching focusing on peak performance and work-life balance. Dr. Sprowls is a trainer for the EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Program. In her work with UNICEF, the US Army and other organizations and agencies, she has provided training for clinicians in disaster sites, worldwide.

