



Compassion Fatigue and Attorneys

What Is Your Self-Care Plan?

BY CHRISTIE SPROWLS, PSY.D.

When Jack became an attorney, he aspired to change society. For years, he tirelessly fought 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's 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 were once a source of pleasure now only increase his sense of despondency and isolation.

Jack has a form of compassion fatigue, also known as burnout or secondary traumatic stress. It is 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 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 of meeting the need to provide basic legal services to 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, 2006; Levin, et al, 2003.)

Attorneys are ranked No. 1 on the list of occupations that are most depressed. (Johns Hopkins University, 1990.) One in four attorneys have exhibited symptoms of clinical depression. One in five is an alcoholic. Approximately one in 10 contemplate suicide at least once each month. In fact, suicide ranks as one of the leading causes of premature death in the legal profession. (North Carolina Bar Association, 1991.)

Symptoms of compassion fatigue include alcohol or substance abuse, overeating, anxiety, apathy, increased irritability, exhaustion, and isolation. These symptoms can become chronic and can last for weeks, months, or years, leaving many to question whether they can continue to practice law. If any of these sound familiar and you would like to assess yourself, there are free self-assessment tools for measuring compassion fatigue available on the Internet.

Prevention

The good news is that compassion fatigue and burnout can be prevented. 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 suggestions can help you avoid compassion fatigue or can start you on the path to recovery:

Start your day with quiet time.

Rather than jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, allow yourself at least five 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.

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 reenergize you.



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THE PATH TO WELLNESS

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 you trust and debrief your cases with him or her regularly.

Set boundaries.

Decide what you really want to do with your time. Learn to say no. Remind yourself that you need and deserve time to do what you truly want to do, including doing nothing.

Unplug.

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

Cultivate your creativity.

Creativity is a potent antidote to compassion fatigue. Try something new or reengage in a hobby you once loved, but have stopped doing. Painting, pottery, or planting a garden can provide a sense of accomplishment and completion, which can be difficult to achieve at work.

Learn to manage stress.

When you are in the throes of compassion fatigue, you may feel helpless and unable to change. Change is difficult, but possible. Invest in a range of techniques to combat stress, such as stress management classes, acupuncture, biofeedback, coaching for work-life balance, or working with a psychologist to help you to learn stress management techniques and how to implement them.

Get support.

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

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
- Decreased ability to feel joy
- Low self-esteem
- Not wanting to answer the phone
- Perfectionism
- Pessimism
- Sleep disturbances
- Workaholism

Go on a wellness retreat.

Retreats can be replenishing, fun, informative, and adventurous. Taking time out from a punishing schedule can help jump-start your transition to new behaviors.

Laugh.

When was 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, seek additional support.

Where to Find Help

The Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) provides crisis counseling and referrals to mental health professionals and resources in your community. Call (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.

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