

TOP

12

SELF-CARE TIPS FOR HELPERS

Transforming Compassion Fatigue into Compassion Satisfaction

Based on the work of Francoise Mathieu, M.Ed., CCC.,
Compassion Fatigue Specialist



1 Take stock of what's on your plate

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? If you are comfortable sharing this with a trusted friend or colleague, have a brainstorming discussion with them on strategies and new ideas.

2 Start a self-care idea collection

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 favorite 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.

3 Find time for yourself every day— Rebalance your workload

Can you think of simple ways to take mini breaks during a work day? 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. Make sure you do one nourishing activity each day.

4 Delegate—learn to ask for help at home and at work

Don't expect others to read your mind: consider holding regular meetings at home and at work to review your 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? One example is staying outside for an extra 10 minutes, watching the birds at the birdfeeder.

6 Learn to say no (or yes) more often

Helpers are often attracted to the field because they are naturally giving to others. 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? 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 and difficult stories you are exposed to. 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?

It is important to recognize the amount of trauma information that we unconsciously absorb during the course of a day.

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.

8 Learn more about Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma

Compassion Fatigue (CF) and Vicarious Trauma (VT) are serious, profound changes that happen to helpers. Learn more about CF and VT, including ways to recognize the signs and symptoms and strategies to address the problem. Consider attending a workshop or read more on the topic.

9 Consider joining a supervision/peer support group

Not all places of work offer the opportunity for peer support. You can organize such a group on your own (whether it be face to face meetings or via email or phone). This can be as small as a group of three colleagues who meet once a month or once a week to debrief and offer support to one another.

10 Attend workshops/professional training regularly

Researchers in the field of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma have identified that attending regular professional training is one of the best ways for helpers to stay renewed and healthy. There are of course several benefits to this: connecting with peers, taking time off work, and building on your clinical skills. Identify an area of expertise that you want to hone. If you are not able to travel to workshops, consider taking online courses.

11 Consider working part time (at this type of job)

Managers often cringe when they hear this, but studies have shown that one of the best protective factors against Compassion Fatigue is to work part time or at least, to see clients on a part time basis and to have other duties the rest of the time.

12 Exercise

We tell our clients how important physical exercise is. Do you do it on a regular basis? Can you think of three small ways to increase your physical activity? One busy counselling service hired a yoga instructor to come once a week to their office and everyone chipped in their \$10 and did yoga together at lunch. Another agency said that they had created a walking club, and that a group of helpers walk outside for 30 minutes three times a week. The key to actually increasing physical exercise is to be realistic in the goals we set out for ourselves. If you don't exercise at all, aiming to walk around the block twice a week is a realistic goal, running a 10km run in two weeks is not.

▶ One More TIP

Once you have chosen the elements of your stress reduction program, Cheryl Sharp, Trauma and Compassion Fatigue Expert from the National Council suggests you create a wellness plan such as WRAP so you can "catch it, check it and change it" ASAP.

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TIPS FOR SUPERVISORS

- Walk around the office to check in on staff and ask how they are doing that day or if they need anything
- Suggest that staff take mini breaks throughout the day to get fresh air, have a snack, stretch
- Engage staff in team huddles, meetings to debrief and allow for support of each other
- Empower staff to start their own staff support group
- Ensure that staff has opportunities for learning inside and outside of the work setting.
- Feeling competent to do own's work reduces stress
- Give staff the tools and resources they need to do their jobs
- Celebrate individual and collective successes