



## Moving from Compassion Fatigue to Compassion Resilience

The prominent traumatologist Charles Figley (2006) defined compassion fatigue as the “deep physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that can result from working day to day in an intense caregiving environment”. In professions where empathy and caring for others are central to service delivery, compassion fatigue is considered an occupational hazard. Nurses, doctors, emergency workers, peer recovery specialists, therapists, and firefighters are a few careers considered to be impacted by compassion fatigue. Regular exposure to traumatized individuals and a chronic imbalance between work demands and resources can result in increased levels of this type of work-related stress.

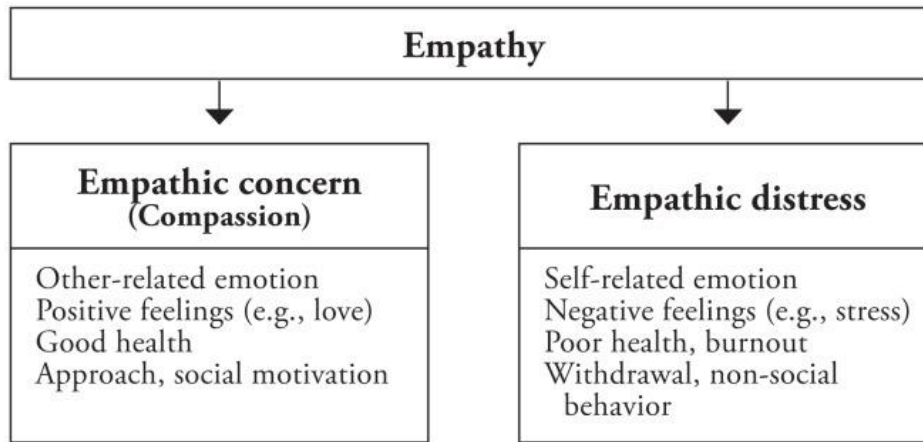
Signs of compassion fatigue include feeling burdened or exhausted, blaming others for their suffering, experiencing increased nightmares, loss of pleasure, self-isolation, difficulty concentrating, poor self-care, substance use, insomnia, and repressing emotions (Carter, 2020). It’s no surprise that the news cycle and current events can indeed compound and exacerbate these feelings of compassion fatigue.

Fortunately, there is a flip side to compassion fatigue, known as **compassion satisfaction** (Stamm, 2010)! This is the pleasure one derives from being able to do their job well. After all, individuals often choose careers centered on caring for others deeply personal and meaningful reasons. Those who experience compassion satisfaction often feel positively about their colleagues, clients, and their overall impact on the greater good of society.

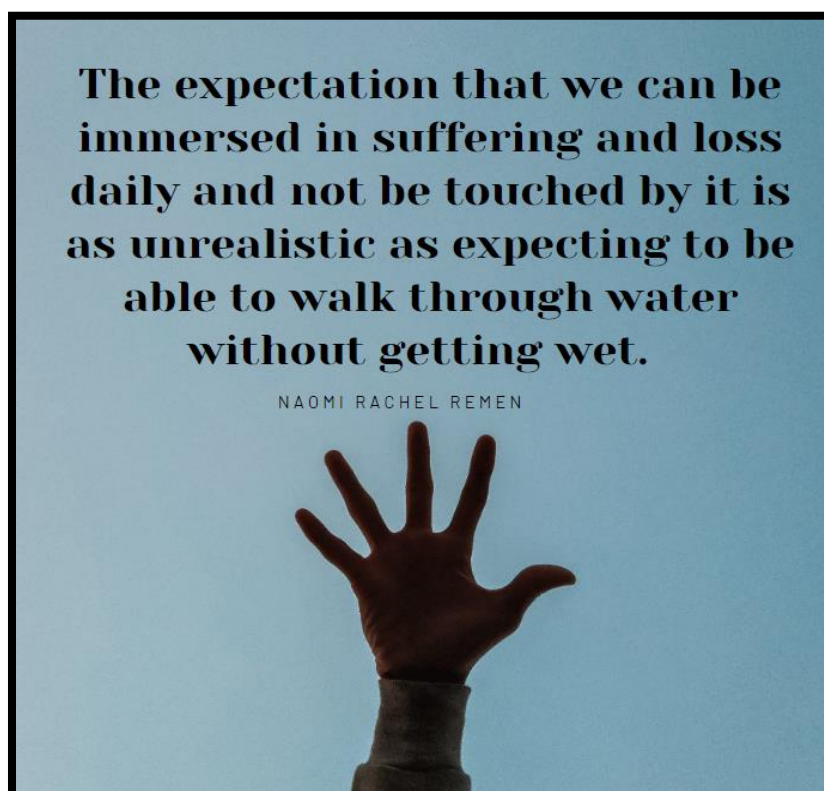
Beth Hudnall Stamm (2010) explored this concept in depth and developed “The Professional Quality of Life Scale”. This scale (manual linked above) assesses work environments and assists teams with moving from compassion fatigue to compassion resilience.

So how do we move from compassion fatigue to compassion satisfaction? Those in leadership positions may choose to formally assess levels of compassion fatigue and burnout on their teams or individuals can actively take steps to help themselves. Below is a list of suggestions for improving feelings of compassion satisfaction.

- **Awareness-** The first and most critical step to working through feelings of compassion fatigue is to learn about it. Understand the signs and symptoms and why you may or may not be affected. This will help you to implement tailored strategies to address your own feelings and specific triggers.
- **Seek out support-** Professional support in the form of therapy or counseling can help you to work through feelings of compassion fatigue and develop a plan for improving your compassion satisfaction.
- **Develop a safe network-** Know who you can and cannot talk to about your feelings of compassion fatigue. Not everyone will be able to safely address or hold space for your feelings. Recognize who your trusted individuals are and ask to have regular check-ins.
- **Talk to your supervisor-** If you feel you might be experiencing compassion fatigue and that it is negatively impacting your professional and maybe even your personal life, reach out to your supervisor to discuss your options. Your supervisor can direct you towards resources and assist you in addressing any barriers to improving these feelings.
- **Take time off-** It is imperative to take time off and completely unplug from work. We are ethically obligated to recognize when something could be impacting our clients and ourselves negatively. Try to release feelings of guilt and understand time off is a necessary for doing your job well.



- **Boundaries-** Take inventory of your personal and professional boundaries. If you overidentify with the individuals you work with, especially those in great distress, you may end up internalizing painful emotions. The above [figure](#) from Stoewen (2019) illustrates the difference between empathetic distress and empathetic concern. A healthy **empathetic** response involves correctly *feeling* with another while simultaneously maintaining **an emotionally separate sense of self**. Ask yourself, are these my emotions? And remember to distinguish between yourself and the individual you are caring for.
- **Validate your emotions-** This is a simple yet powerful act that we can all engage in. Monitor your self-talk and remember to quiet your hyper-critical voice. It is natural to have feelings of compassion fatigue and important to recognize and validate this. Shift your inner dialogue to one of normalization and acceptance. This will help you take steps towards addressing negative emotions.
- **Limit news & increase pleasurable experiences-** Limit the amount of news and social media scrolling that you do. Give yourself permission to take thirty minutes off. Get outside instead. Take time to expose yourself to things you find pleasurable such as nature, music, or any other self-care activity.
- **List the positives-** Keep sight of your own life and your internal world. Gratitude lists are highly powerful tools for increasing positive feelings. Start small and simple and make it a daily habit.



## Pocket Card for COVID-19 Crisis – (March 2020)

Dr. Beth Hudnall Stamm developed this revised "pocket card" about caring for yourself in the face of difficult work for the current COVID-19 health crisis. (See below or [download at this link](#).) Please use, copy, and distribute it freely, as long as (a) authors are credited, (b) no changes are made, and (c) it is not sold. We hope you find it useful.

### CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.

#### 10 things to do each day

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Vary the work that you do.
4. Do some light exercise.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

**For More Information see your supervisor or visit [www.istss.org](http://www.istss.org),  
[www.proqol.org](http://www.proqol.org) and [www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)**

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### FOCUSING YOUR EMPATHY

Your empathy for others helps you do your job. It is important to take good care of your feelings and thoughts by monitoring how you use them. The most resilient workers are those that know how to turn their feelings to work mode when they go on duty, but off-work mode when they go off duty. This is not denial; it is a coping strategy. It is a way they get maximum protection while working (feelings switched to work mode) and maximum support while resting (feelings switched off-work mode).

#### How to become better at switching between Work and Off-Work Modes

1. Make this a conscious process. Talk to yourself as you switch.
2. Use images that make you feel safe and protected (work-mode) or connected and cared for (non-work mode) to help you switch.
3. Develop rituals that help you switch as you start and stop work.
4. Breathe slowly and deeply to calm yourself when starting a tough job.