

# PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

## COMPASSION FATIGUE . . . “RUNNING ON EMPTY”

Good self-care is critical for caregivers. We owe it to ourselves and our families to lead joyful, whole lives. Yet, this kind of work is draining - physically, emotionally and spiritually. Good self-care is a necessary ingredient in providing quality care to others. They are very sensitive to our ability to “be with them.”

It is important to realize that you cannot draw close to others without beginning to affect and be affected by them. Some describe this as “universal vulnerability.” It takes practice to become aware of what is taking place inside ourselves while at the same time trying to grasp what is taking place inside others. Change begins with insight. By recognizing when we are reaching our limits, we can better anticipate or address our needs. In this manner we best care for ourselves and for others.

### “RUNNING ON EMPTY” INDICATORS

- Exhaustion and loss of energy
- Irritability and impatience
- Cynicism and detachment
- Omnipotence and feeling indispensable
- Physical complaints and depression
- Disorientation and confusion
- Minimization and denial of feelings

### HOW DO WE REFUEL?

#### PERSONAL

#### PROFESSIONAL

##### Individual

##### **Focused Reflecting**

- bath
- walk to/from work
- journaling

##### **Distracting**

- hobby
- book
- exercise
- yoga

##### **Focusing**

- shared moments with patients/families
- follow up notes or visits

##### **Education**

- conference
- workshop
- course
- case presentation

##### Team

##### **Celebrations**

- birthdays
- births
- weddings

##### **Sharing Information**

- photos
- social outings
- memorial book

##### **Peer Support**

- designated meeting time
- identifying primary peers

##### **Acknowledgment of the Life Lost**

- memorial service
- death rounds

##### **Education**

- sharing information

(over)

## CAREGIVING & PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Each one of us has our own unique style of relating to the stress of living. Sometimes we manage stress well; other times we need to be mindful of ways to make changes in how we are coping to avoid Compassion Fatigue. (Compassion Fatigue is a state of tension and preoccupation with an individual or cumulative trauma of our families. It becomes evident when we have repeated thoughts about our families or their situations, we avoid or feel numb about certain aspects, or we are persistently anxious. As a result our competency is impaired, we distance ourselves, are more unstable and have less energy. If we see our work as a way to enrich each moment of our living, we may well discover a deep caring within our souls that teaches us to learn and grow each day.)

- Recognize that you are working in an area of care where there is a high risk for compassion fatigue. Keeping yourself aware that you are “at risk” for this will keep you from denying the existence of stress related signs and symptoms.
- Create periods of rest and renewal. The quickest way to burnout is spreading yourself too thin, such as trying to help too many people or taking on too many tasks.
- Practice setting limits and alleviating stresses you can do something about. Work to achieve a clear set of expectations and set realistic deadlines.
- Learn effective time-management skills. Don't allow time to become an enemy. Set practical goals on how you spend your time.
- Work to cultivate a personal support system.
- Be true to yourself in both your work and play. Make time each day to remind yourself of what is important to you.
- Work to understand your motivation to help others. Does your need to help others relate in any way to your own unresolved struggles? If so, be certain not to use your caregiving relationships to work on your own personal issues.
- Develop healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns. We are often aware of the importance of these areas for those we help however as caregivers we sometimes neglect them ourselves.
- Strive to identify the unique ways in which your body informs you that you are stressed. A constant state of physical tension often results in deterioration, which results in physical breakdown.

All of us may have occasional days when our motivation and energy levels vary. While this fluctuation in energy states is normal, “compassion fatigue” is cumulative and develops overtime. By considering the guidelines listed above and seeking the support and encouragement from others, you are doing the best that you can to prevent or address compassion fatigue.

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