

ASCD Express 11.18 - Compassion Fatigue: The Silent Thief in Our Schools

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Compassion Fatigue: The Silent Thief in Our Schools

Cheri Brown Sizemore

I love you so much it hurts. So many parents have quoted these song lyrics to their children to express the depth and complexity of their feelings. But teachers can also be so emotionally invested in their students that it takes a physical and psychological toll. Teachers naturally become attached to, protective of, and concerned for the young people they educate and train for more than nine months of a school year. Today's classrooms are filled with young victims of trauma carrying the baggage of poverty, hunger, abuse, violence, neglect, illness, divorce, death, and more. After a period of time struggling with concern for these students, daily reminders of the obstacles they face, and the human desire to support and relieve them, some educators begin to suffer the symptoms of *compassion fatigue*. Unchecked, this condition can rob our classrooms of caring and committed educators. How can teachers and administrators recognize the problem and reduce its impact before compassion fatigue affects their work?

Compassion Fatigue

Simply put, compassion fatigue can develop when one cares "too much" for another who has shared firsthand traumatic experiences. It is a unique form of burnout, previously linked with nursing professionals, therapists, and early

responders, that has been described as "the cost of caring" for others' in emotional pain. If left unrecognized and untreated, this condition can turn into a full-blown case of burnout that can lead to even more serious outcomes. In this article, teachers, administrators, and supervisors will learn to recognize the symptoms and will discover steps toward healing to reverse the effects of this silent thief in our schools.

Signs and Symptoms

According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), more than 10 million children each year in the United States experience traumatic events in their lives. Likely, no school is immune to cases of juvenile trauma. Thus, awareness of the symptoms and early recognition can help you respond to compassion fatigue. A variety of symptoms can manifest themselves in a person's life, including

• Anger and/or cynicism	• Hypervigilance
• Anxiousness	• Inability to embrace complexity
• Avoidance	• Inability to listen
• Chronic exhaustion	• Loss of creativity
• Disconnection	• Poor boundaries
• Fear	• Poor self-care
• Guilt	• Sleeplessness
• Hopelessness	• Survival coping (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

What Teachers Can Do

Certain types of people seem to be more susceptible to the effects of compassion fatigue. Teachers should evaluate their tendencies to fall into

these categories: excessive dedication, compulsivity, perfectionism, and achievement-oriented. As we discover the terrible situations their students they struggle with, the pressures and demands of our jobs—including tight schedules, unrealistic expectations, lack of positive feedback or support—adds to our psychological loads. Without realizing it, we start feeling resentful rather than resourceful, detached rather than delighted, and exhausted rather than excited. Often, we are not even aware of what is causing these feelings. Here are a just a few things you can do to maintain sanity and stability while doing your best to comfort children who desperately need your love and concern.

1. Be kind to yourself. Don't think that because you are not able to handle these situations that you are weak or incompetent. Remind yourself that suffering with compassion fatigue indicates that you listen well, open your heart, and care so much for your students in need. Be sure that you take time for just you—meditate, have a massage, take a bubble bath, read a book, write poetry, take a long walk, sing, dance—whatever best rejuvenates you. To recover from this disabling condition, you must take time for you.

2. Journal your thoughts. Did you ever keep a diary? Journaling helps by getting troubling thoughts out of your head and onto the paper. You can go back to your journal, reread it to gain perspective, and imagine good thoughts for those whom you care so much.

3. Don't face this alone. Force yourself to be with others, even if you do not feel like you can. Approach your administrators, your counselors, your colleagues, your friends, your spiritual advisor, or anyone who will listen to you. Keeping these emotions inside you will only make things more difficult for you and your students. Others may be experiencing the same feelings, and together you can find support. If you feel like you are not able to get back to the "normal you" in two or three weeks, seek professional help. Studies (Figley, 2002) have shown that you can heal from compassion fatigue before it turns into serious burnout, and you can manage to continue to work and

care for students with problems, while taking care of yourself.

4. Seek positive influences. Stay away from negative thoughts and situations (which might include the teachers' lounge during your planning period). Find ways to stimulate your thought processes. Take a course online, read stimulating articles, continue to look for better strategies to be a quality teacher. Keep company with those who can laugh and share gratitude with you.

What Administrators Can Do

While teachers must seek out help when they feel overwhelmed, administrators must watch for signs and trends in their schools that might indicate problems or concerns.

1. Know your faculty. Stay apprised of personal trauma that the teachers might be experiencing. Those who face trauma in their own lives may be more easily affected by the traumas of their students. Know which students deal with or have dealt with trauma and inform their teachers. **Watch** for changes in teachers' personalities, work habits, attendance patterns, and interactions with others.

2. Encourage teacher interaction. Build in time each week (each day is preferable) for teacher collaboration during which they can discuss strategies for lessons, classroom management, student behavior, and share own struggles. Schedule events to provide opportunities for teachers (and their families) to socialize together—for down time, fun time, and time to get to know each other outside of school duties. **Watch** for teachers who withdraw from their colleagues and those who work in isolation.

3. Show your support. Have an open-door policy that offers a safe place for teachers to approach you with confidential matters and concerns. Offer assistance or connect them with professionals who can help them deal with the fatigue and burnout. Discover a variety of ways to recognize the work they

do and to praise them with your words and actions. Make sure that the teachers have the tools and materials necessary to make their jobs as manageable as possible. **Watch** for teachers who never smile and who avoid interaction with you and the front office.

4. Encourage self-care. Set up workshops led by experts to identify the risks in dealing with trauma situations and to share healthy coping strategies. Create a "self-care board" in the teachers' lounge for all to share their favorite tips, and even run weekly contests for the best ideas. Rather than holding a lot of meetings, allow teachers to spend that time in exercise groups, walking clubs, yoga sessions, and more. When meetings are necessary, devote the first few minutes to focus on "caring for yourself." You, as the leader, should have your own self-care plan. **Watch** for teachers who demonstrate poor self-care (appearance, dress), who never participate in activities outside of their classroom, and who work long hours.

The Children Still Need Help

Although some teachers discover they are not able to rise above compassion fatigue or burnout, and ultimately, must leave their jobs, the children remain and still need educators who can care for them. Therefore, everyone involved must know the impact that this silent thief can have on an entire school. Rather than watch teachers leave, we should devote time and effort to the seriousness of the effects of compassion fatigue. By identifying compassion fatigue early and dealing with it quickly in resourceful ways, we can keep it from stealing teachers who care from the classroom.

Reference

Figley, C. R. (Ed.) (2002). *Treating compassion fatigue*. New York: Brunner/Routledge.

Cheri Brown Sizemore earned her doctoral degree in educational

administration from Baylor University. She is a retired teacher, administrator, and author of *[To Love to Teach Again: 10 Secrets to Rekindling Passion to Keep You in the Classroom.](#)*

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