

# Compassion Fatigue

**ENA** TOPIC BRIEF



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## Key Information

Compassion is a core value of nursing practice.

Compassion fatigue is the exhaustion from caring and from providing care to others in distress, leading to caregiver loss of empathy.

Compassion satisfaction is the feeling of joy, fulfillment, purpose, and gratification from the provision of care.

Compassion fatigue is different from burnout, but may present with similar signs (i.e., adverse effects on physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being).

Individual actions (e.g., prioritizing self-care, mindfulness, and setting boundaries) can decrease compassion fatigue.

Organizational actions that support healthy work environments and minimize stressors can foster compassion satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue in their nurses.

## Compassion Fatigue

### Purpose

Compassion is a core value of nursing practice and essential to provision of good patient-centered care (van der Cingel, 2022). Compassion fatigue is the detrimental effect that may result from caring and providing care. Emergency nurses may be particularly susceptible to developing compassion fatigue due to the nature of their work and whether they serve in the role of double-duty caregivers (providing both professional care at work and care to someone at home such as a family member). The purpose of this topic brief is to provide awareness about compassion fatigue and suggest interventions to minimize its incidence and mitigate its negative effects.

### Overview

In healthcare, compassion is described as having empathy or understanding of distress in another and the desire to assist to alleviate distress and suffering (Durkin et al., 2020; Malenfant et al., 2022; Marshman et al., 2024). Studies have shown that patients who reported receiving compassionate care have better health outcomes (Moss et al., 2019; Posa et al., 2022)

Compassion fatigue is the exhaustion that may result from caring and providing care. In other words, it is an adverse effect of compassion. In the nursing literature, Joinson (1992) first used the term “compassion fatigue” to describe the loss of nurturing ability in nurses experiencing burnout. Seminal research related to compassion fatigue is attributed to traumatologist, Charles Figley (1995), who affirmed that secondary traumatic stress (also referred to as secondary victimization or vicarious trauma) and secondary traumatic stress disorder were interchangeable with the concept of compassion fatigue. Figley noted that compassion fatigue, with its less negative connotation, was the preferable term among nurses and emergency personnel.

Compassion fatigue has since been identified in other helping professions, such as social work, law, and clergy (Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022), as well as in family members providing care for their loved ones (Liao et al., 2022). How compassion fatigue has been defined in these other contexts varies slightly (Wynn, 2020). Collectively, compassion fatigue can be defined as exhaustion from caring or providing care to others in distress, leading to caregiver loss of empathy and adverse effects on physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being.

## Signs of Compassion Fatigue

The nature of emergency work may increase emergency nurses' susceptibility to developing compassion fatigue. In their day-to-day routine, or when a disaster occurs, emergency nurses provide compassionate care for what at times may be an overwhelming number of patients who are in distress, suffering from their illnesses and injuries (Perez-Garcia et al., 2021; Ruiz-Fernandez et al., 2021). For nurses who are double-duty care givers, the exhaustion from their caring work may also be compounded by caring they provide at home (Baumblatt et al., 2022; Detaille et al., 2020). Double-duty caregivers are healthcare professionals who, in their personal lives, provide care for their loved ones (e.g., family members who have may have special needs, chronic illnesses, or are at the end-of-life).

When a nurse experiences compassion fatigue, the empathetic aspect of care and the motivation to provide it are diminished. The loss of empathy is what distinguishes compassion fatigue from burnout (Henson, 2020; Wynn, 2020). Burnout is a progressive process marked by emotional exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, disengagement, and inability to achieve professional goals related to chronic occupational stress (World Health Organization, 2019). Where compassion fatigue may have a sudden onset, burnout develops gradually over time (Henson, 2020; Wynn, 2020).

Signs of compassion fatigue and burnout overlap, particularly the adverse effects on a person's physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Following are a few of the most common signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue (Canadian Medical Association, 2020).

- Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of patient suffering
- Reduced feelings of empathy and sensitivity
- Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work demands
- Feeling detached, numb, and emotionally disconnected
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Increased anxiety, sadness, anger, and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping and sleep disturbances like nightmares
- Physical symptoms like headaches, nausea, upset stomach, and dizziness
- Increased conflict in personal relationships
- Neglect of your own self-care
- Withdrawal and self-isolation
- An increase in substance use as a form of self-medication

## Combating Compassion Fatigue

In addition to recognizing the signs of compassion fatigue, screening tools exist that may be utilized to assess the presence or severity of compassion fatigue. The validated measurement tool used most often in studies on compassion fatigue is the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) developed by Stamm (2010). Now in its fifth version, the ProQOL measures factors related to compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction. Compassion satisfaction is the feeling of joy, fulfillment, purpose, and gratification in the provision of care for others (Francis-Wegner, 2023; Stamm, 2010).

Numerous studies have identified individual and organizational factors that may contribute to compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Francis-Wegner 2023; Garnett et al.,

2023; Kartsonaki et al., 2023; Perez-Garcia et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024). Interventions that may increase compassion satisfaction and mitigate compassion fatigue are discussed in the following sub sections.

### Individual Interventions

Individual interventions that may increase compassion satisfaction and help mitigate compassion fatigue include the following:

- **Self-care practices.** Self-care practices have been shown to increase compassion satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Manzenedo-Moreno et al., 2025). Self-care practices may include leisure activities (solo or with friends and family), exercise, and relaxation practices.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindfulness practices have been shown to mitigate negative emotions that may result from compassion fatigue (Joseph & Jose, 2024; Lipsa et al., 2024). Mindfulness is a form of meditation where the individual is acutely aware of their feelings in a given moment, with no judgment imparted of having such emotions nor meaning ascribed to them (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

### Organizational Interventions

Organizational interventions that may increase compassion satisfaction and help mitigate compassion fatigue include the following:

- **Support nurse wellness.** Offering programs that support nurse well-being may increase compassion satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue (Baqeas et al., 2021; Manzenedo-Moreno et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2024). Wellness programs and initiatives may include providing education sessions on self-care practices and stress coping, employee assistance programs, and offering spaces where nurses may find needed respite during their workday.
- **Maintain healthy and supportive work environment.** Perceived non-support, stressful workloads, and poor work conditions contribute to decreased compassion satisfaction and increase compassion fatigue (Baumblatt et al., 2023; Garnett et al., 2023; Kartsonaki et al., 2023; Perez-Garcia et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024). Maintaining balanced workloads, minimizing the floating of personnel to other care units, collaborating on schedule adaptations for double-duty care providers, and encouraging good team dynamics are some examples of how to promote healthy and supportive work environments. Organizational leaders may consider periodically screening their staff with ProQOL Health Measure (ProQOL adapted for healthcare workers) to identify team members who may need extra support.

## Conclusion

Providing compassionate care is an essential component to nursing practice. The nature of their work and compounding work environment factors place nurses at risk for compassion fatigue. Both nurses and organizations should make efforts to strengthen compassion satisfaction and recognize, prevent, and combat compassion fatigue. Maintaining nurses' well-being enables nurses to continue their special work, providing compassionate care for patients.

## Resources

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (n.d.). Is there a cost to protecting, caring for and saving others? Beware of compassion fatigue. <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/is-there-a-cost-to-protecting-caring-for-and-saving-others-beware-of-compassion-fatigue>

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## Definitions of Terms

**Burnout:** A cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion, feelings of powerlessness, disengagement, and inability to achieve work goals associated with organizational-related work stressors.

**Compassion:** Having empathy or understanding of distress in another and the desire to assist to alleviate distress and suffering.

**Compassion fatigue:** The exhaustion from caring and providing care to others in distress, leading to caregiver loss of empathy and adverse effects on physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being.

**Compassion satisfaction:** The feeling of joy, fulfillment, purpose, and gratification in the provision of care for others.

**Double-duty caregiving:** A professional caregiver who also has caregiving responsibilities in their personal life.

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