

Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Risks to Effective Professional Relationships

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Introduction: Compassion fatigue (CF) is deemed to be a risk for all health professionals. Embedded in working relationships, which frequently promote despair and functioning in care giving environments that are stressful, health practioners are constantly presented with heart wrenching and emotional challenges. CF is an intuitively compelling concept but one that, despite efforts to determine its meaning, lacks clarity and thus could be undermining therapeutic relationships.

Objectives: This inter-disciplinary study seeks to 1. describe CF as experienced by health professionals; 2. identify care situations that health professionals describe as leading to CF; 3. describe health professionals' experience of coping with CF; and 4. identify environmental supports and barriers that influence professionals' experience of CF.

Theoretical Approach: This study is grounded in human science and the philosophic traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The aim is to uncover, with greater understanding compassion fatigue as it is experienced by health professionals including occupational therapists. Purposive (non-probability) sampling enabled the selection of participants self-identifying their experience of compassion fatigue and willing and able to share detail-rich anecdotes. Subjects were interviewed across professional groups and the country face to face or by telephone.

Conclusions: Preliminary results indicate a complex interaction of phenomena associated with "CF". The results across five health professions are shared and compared. The identified commonalities and differences in the lived experiences of respondents will inform attendees of the phenomena and the conditions, which increase the likelihood of its emergence and those that help lessen the effects on therapeutic relationships.

Contribution to the evidence base of practice: Our understanding of complex nature of relational engagement as a core component of ethical healthcare practice is enhanced. Understanding CF has implications for the wellbeing of professionals, for the sustained availability and retention of staff, and for the maintenance of quality work environments in health services.

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