

# Compassion Fatigue: Connection to Trauma, Stages, and Assessments

## Section 3



INTRODUCTION

In this section of the toolkit we will delve more deeply into the concept of compassion fatigue; how it connects to our understanding of trauma, the stages that one might experience if compassion fatigue is not addressed, and how to assess our levels of secondary trauma, burnout, and compassion satisfaction. In section two we defined compassion fatigue as an umbrella term for both burnout and secondary trauma. As we grow in our understanding of the extent and impact of trauma, including historical trauma and oppression, on the students we teach, their families, and our communities, our ability to take in such pain and maintain an open, compassionate approach can be challenged. Compassion fatigue can develop slowly overtime and go unrecognized. This section gives us insights that can guide us to take proactive measures to prevent its progression.



INFORMATION

We know that being in the field of education can be rewarding and also challenging. Teaching and acquiring knowledge is hard work in and of itself; however, it can be more difficult when students present us with obstacles, such as homelessness, community violence, physical and emotional abuse, and domestic violence in the home environment. These trials often impede the learning process. [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction offers excellent resources](#) to better understand trauma, its impact, and how to create trauma sensitive schools.

Staff that work with students who experience traumatic events are often deeply affected. This includes witnessing a student experiencing discrimination or knowledge of the impact of oppression on a family or even a whole community. This is especially true for staff who have had their own experiences of trauma. While no one can truly understand each unique experience of oppression, the ongoing witnessing of an unjust world through the experiences of youth and families with whom the staff have a connection, can lead to secondary trauma. While it is uncommon, some helpers experience some of the same symptoms of trauma as if the experience had happened to them. It is best to seek professional help to be able to offer support for those living the events and manage one's own reactions.

Ross Greene, clinical child psychologist and respected author and trainer in the education field, refers to compassion fatigue as a decrease in a person's capacity to empathize with those who are suffering. Secondary trauma is one aspect of compassion fatigue. Adding the concept of burnout creates a more inclusive understanding of the many reasons some educators may experience compassion fatigue. Burnout can be the outcome when educators face unrealistic job expectations or do not know how to successfully meet typical expectations. Very few staff come to a job in a school setting knowing fully how to address multiple academic expectations as well as all of the behavioral challenges that are presented to them by their students. These expectations can be overwhelming and can lead to burnout if measures are not taken to build skills, support resilience and alleviate the symptoms.

**What does compassion fatigue look like?** Compassion fatigue can be summed up as *the feelings of depression, sadness, exhaustion, anxiety, and irritation that may be experienced by people who are helpers in their work and/or personal life*. What are the symptoms to look for early on to be able to minimize its impact and create (or return to) a path of resilience? Eric Gentry, PhD, offers a way to understand compassion fatigue in his staged model. Cat pictures were added to Gentry's work by some of the authors of this toolkit to add some fun and assist with memory. Staff at First Stage Milwaukee, created [this helpful video](#), set to the Overture from the musical Cats, to explain the stages.

Developed in partnership with:



[compassionresiliencetoolkit.org](http://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)

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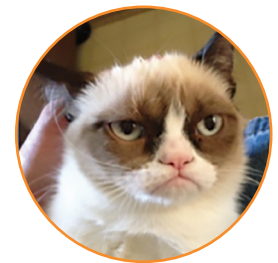
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### Compassion Fatigue Cycle *(adapted from work of Eric Gentry, PhD 2012)*



**Zealot/Idealist** – We are committed, involved, and available. We problem solve and are ready to make a difference. We willingly put in extra hours, and our enthusiasm overflows. We volunteer and go the extra mile, often without prompting.

**Irritability** – We begin to see the imperfect nature of the systems and people around us. We distance ourselves from and even belittle our students, coworkers, and friends. As we do so, we talk unfairly about their challenges and denigrate their efforts. The use of humor is sometimes strained, and we often daydream or become distracted when students are speaking with us. Oversights and mistakes begin to occur as we notice our anger, cynicism, diminished creativity, and sadness.



**Withdrawal** – We are unable to embrace the complexity of the problems, and we lose our ability to see students as individuals, instead they become irritants. Complaints may be made about our work, and we might have problems in our personal life. We no longer wish to talk about work and may not even admit to what we do. We feel tired all of the time and thus neglect our family, our coworkers, our students and ourselves. Our shield gets thicker and thicker to block our pain and sadness. We may experience difficulty empathizing and feeling to numb to other's pain.

**Zombie** – Our hopelessness turns to rage, and we begin to detest people. We easily move to anger if our coworkers dare to question us. Others become incompetent or ignorant in our eyes, and we begin to work in a silo. We have no time for humor or fun. We may have a sense that we can't ever do enough, an inflated sense of importance related to our work, hyper-vigilance/sleeplessness, and a sense of persecution.



**Unwell vs. Renewal** – If we have not addressed this cycle earlier, we come to a fork in the road where we either continue deeper into compassion fatigue to a place of illness, fatigue, and overwhelm or we take a turn towards renewal, a place of resiliency, hardiness, and transformation.

The good news is that at any stage in the cycle, one can learn skills and mindsets that change the trajectory towards compassion satisfaction. The goal of this toolkit is for us to learn these mindsets and skills in order to proactively address our ways of being to avoid compassion fatigue and, when it does arise, address it early with confidence and support. It is beneficial to begin by getting a sense of the starting place for ourselves. The ProQOL is a 30 question, self-administered, self-scored, free assessment found [here](#).

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SELF-CARE



STRATEGIES

Throughout the toolkit, we will practice strategies to support compassion resilience from the four sectors of the Wellness Compass.

### HEART: Commonalities Practice to Build Compassion

Try this five-step exercise when you are with a client, colleague, or family member and feelings of compassion seem out of reach. Do it discreetly and try to do all the steps with the same person. You can begin by simply bringing someone to mind. Eventually you can do this when you want to bring yourself out of a place of judgment in a tough interaction with another person. At the root of it all, we are all human beings that crave attention, recognition, affection, and above all, happiness.

With your attention geared to the other person, tell yourself:

Step 1: "Just like me, this person **is seeking happiness** in their life."

Step 2: "Just like me, this person **is trying to avoid suffering** in their life."

Step 3: "Just like me, this person **has known sadness, loneliness and despair.**"

Step 4: "Just like me, this person **is seeking to fill their needs.**"

Step 5: "Just like me, this person **is learning about life.**"

Adapted from [Zen Habits: A Guide to Cultivating Compassion in Your Life, With 7 Practices](#).



WHAT'S NEXT

### System Drivers of Compassion Fatigue