

## Compassion fatigue

We often become humanitarian workers because of our care and compassion for others and these also help us do the work well.

*'Every day in our caregiving roles we empty out in order to be present to those in our care. If we continue to empty out without filling up again, we place ourselves in harm's way. Caregivers often misinterpret their need for self-care as selfishness or self-centredness.'* Patricia Smith

### **What is compassion fatigue?**

Compassion fatigue (also known as vicarious trauma) is a reaction to the 'on-going demands of *being compassionate* in helping those who are suffering'. (Downs, 2013) This includes listening to or hearing about stories of people who are experiencing much hardship and suffering. This includes learning about information such as numbers of people injured, killed or types of attacks. These experiences can impact and possibly lead to changes in our psychological, physical and spiritual well-being.

The impact of compassion fatigue is dependent on the presence of protective factors, e.g. being resilient, and risk factors, e.g. working and living in a high-risk environment. Protective factors will help you prevent compassion fatigue and risk factors could increase the likelihood of compassion fatigue and often need mitigation.

### **The effects of compassion fatigue**

- Shifts in identity, i.e. the way in which you think of yourself as a professional or friend
- Modifications in beliefs about safety, control, values, religious faith etc.
- Changes in behaviour, e.g. making decisions without enough reflection, working too much and/or taking on too much responsibility, not completing work assignments, taking excessive time off, withdrawing socially, becoming more irritable, intolerant, increased misuse of food etc.
- Alterations in attitude, e.g. not feeling in control, blaming others; devaluing or ridiculing beneficiaries, other colleagues, managers, governments, e.g. 'why don't they do something to help themselves?'; becoming extremely cynical, depressed or demotivated, e.g. "I only have another four weeks until my next RandR, so I won't bother going to work on time."

### **Protective and risk factors**

1. Dealing with emotions and problems

Those who know how to deal positively with their own emotions and problems as and when they arise are more likely to avoid becoming fatigued because of the emotional aspects of the work. Although it is important to recognize that there are cultural differences in terms of the expression of emotions, it is important to acknowledge the emotionality of the work including the fact that it can be extremely painful at times. Avoiding emotions or problems, blaming and/or ridiculing others will not help anyone. It is better to ask for support, share emotions appropriately, and actively solve problems.

## 2. Personal history

As adults, it is likely that we have experienced personal loss and pain and perhaps even some trauma. These experiences and associated emotions may have an adverse impact if they have not been resolved psychologically. If they have become a part of us in a healthy way, then they could increase our understanding and empathy for others in similar situations. This work can be done by yourself, with someone we trust or a counsellor.

However if we have not addressed these, then they could make us more vulnerable and some of the past may be triggered by present events and this may negatively impact coping and work performance.

## 3. Work and organizational environment

A positive work environment that is supportive of all employees is crucial in helping staff manage and cope with the emotional aspects of the work. This includes being compassionate and accommodating of each other regardless of who the person is. An environment that encourages poor behaviour such as discrimination and harassment can lead to individuals not coping well with their work.

International staff also have to contend with working in cultures that may be different and this can lead to isolation and unfamiliarity. They can also be impacted by cultural differences, local and international.

National staff may have more personal day to day experiences of listening to and living with difficult situations and experiences. They may have to, outside work, also support immediate and extended family and friends.

We each have a responsibility to be mindful and compassionate towards self and each other so that we can collectively achieve the aims and help each other and the people for whom the mission exists. Our diversity is part of our richness.

## 4. Current life

Factors in our current life can make us susceptible, e.g. going through a divorce, family death or illness especially if these are competing needs. The way in which we cope with day to day life and the associated stresses also has a bearing. Making sure you live a healthy life is crucial, e.g. setting boundaries at work, making sure you get rest, exercising, eating and drinking properly.

Poor quality social support is a risk factor as this limits our ability to process and deal with the sensitive aspects of our life and work. Having some-one to talk to is key but we need to understand that sometimes friends and family who are not directly involved in our work may not be able to cope with what we face as they may have their own issues.

## Exercise

It is productive for us to understand our individual protective and risk factors and then make the necessary changes. Please try the exercise below.

A. *What motivated you to do this work?*

*What motivates you today?*

B. *How do you express and manage your emotions at work and life?*

*What/who helps you cope with your emotions?*

*What/who prevents you managing your emotions?*

C. *How supportive and empathic is your work environment and culture? What is your contribution to the organizational culture?*

*How productively are you working?*

*How much compassion do you have for beneficiaries, fellow colleagues and junior and senior staff?*

D. *Are you at risk of compassion fatigue?*

*How has your own identity changed in the last year?*

*How positive and supportive are your behaviours and attitudes?*

E. *What will you do differently to healthily include your emotions in your work and life?*

**For further information or a confidential discussion, please contact Staff Welfare**

## References

'Understanding and addressing vicarious trauma' Pearlman and McKay, 2008