

Compassion Fatigue In 2020

And How to Find Rest

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“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”
Mark 6:31

“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.”

C. Figley, 1995

Compassion fatigue and its relatives, burnout and vicarious trauma, have long been associated with caregivers such as doctors, nurses, therapists, and first responders. Healthcare workers are aware of the risks that their professions bring and are encouraged to regulate their fatigue with proper self-care. However, the events of 2020 have are beginning to show the same range of symptoms to a new, unsuspecting group – the general public.

Over the last few months, we have been bombarded with regular messages of danger, destruction, and death. Daily reports on COVID cases and hospitalizations led to monitoring death rates by state and county. Personal cameras documented the deaths of black Americans at the hands of authorities sworn to protect them. Peaceful protests gave way to riots, looting, and violent takeover of municipalities. Social media, presumably designed as a place for friends to connect, has turned into a toxic battle of opinion on medical expertise, and the wearing of masks, with such finger pointing that friendships have crumbled over it. Relentless articles on how our country is going down the tubes and where the fault lies, incite fear. Revelations on the goings on of celebrities and politicians behind the scenes bring horror. For many, it has become too much. The constant negative input has brought about a sense of collective despair. We don't want to hear anymore...we can't.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” **Matthew 11:28.**

Ultimately, the answer for weary souls is to take our eyes off the images designed to keep us entangled and to place them on the One who promises to give us peace. Media sources constantly vie for our attention and affection at the expense of our well-being. But how do we resist their call? Practically speaking, how do we change our gaze? And how do we know if we are suffering from compassion fatigue?

The first step in healing compassion fatigue is recognizing it.

On the inside it may feel like sadness, heaviness or even a level of depression.
On the outside, it may look like:

Complaining

Blaming

Exhaustion– physical, emotional, mental, spiritual

Blunted or Inability to Care – caring feels like a burden

Emotional numbing

Fatigue

Difficulty concentrating

Sleep disturbance – difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep

Can't stop thinking about the event(s)

Anger or Irritability

The next steps involve nurturing your body, mind, and soul.

Replace time spent in activities that drain your spirit with those that strengthen you:

Take some time off – even a mini staycation can be restorative

Limit social media

Limit the news

Increase time in prayer, scripture reading, meditation

Get outside – connect with creation

Connect with a loved one

Look for hope (Philippians 4:8)

Reconnect with the “small things” that bring you true joy

Last, make sure you regularly schedule time for fun.

What makes you feel good inside? What makes you laugh? What gives you a sense of fulfillment or accomplishment?

Listen to music

Watch funny movies

Read a light-hearted or heart-warming book

Swim, hike, walk

Host an outdoor get together with friends (with social distancing)

Take a scenic drive

Catch up on a something you've wanted to do

As we move into the last months of the year, use the time to rest from the overwhelming events of 2020. Disconnecting from the repeated images that bring stress and heartbreak while reconnecting with people and activities that bring contentment will help insulate us from the despair that come from burnout and compassion fatigue.