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Ageing Well

WP3/ A1 Training Programme

Module 6

Compassion Fatigue and the Importance of self-care for
caregivers of the elderly

Institute of Development- IoD





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Module 6: Compassion Fatigue and the importance of self-care for caregivers of the elderly

1. Introduction to compassion fatigue among caregivers of the elderly

Caregiving for the elderly can be an immensely rewarding experience, offering a deep sense of purpose and connection. However, it also presents considerable emotional and physical challenges that can lead to compassion fatigue, a condition characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion. This state arises from the prolonged stress and demands of caregiving, often leaving individuals overwhelmed and drained.

Research indicates that a substantial number of caregivers experience high levels of stress. According to the National Alliance for Caregiving (2009), 31% of caregivers reported that caregiving was very stressful, and 47% rated their health as poor to fair. These findings highlight the urgent need to recognise and address compassion fatigue - characterised by burnout and secondary traumatic stress - while also fostering compassion satisfaction, the positive feelings associated with caregiving (Stamn, 2010).

This module thoroughly addresses compassion fatigue, providing caregivers with a thorough understanding of its risk factors and effects. Furthermore, the module offers practical self-care strategies and techniques to support caregivers in managing compassion fatigue. By integrating these approaches, caregivers can enhance their well-being, sustain resilience and continue providing high-quality care to the elderly.

Objectives:

1. Define and Recognise: Provide caregivers with a clear understanding of compassion fatigue, including its definition, common symptoms and the key risk factors contributing to its development among those caring for the elderly.
2. Analyse Impact: Explore the profound effects of compassion fatigue on personal well-being and interpersonal relationships, helping caregivers recognise its influence on their lives and interactions with others.



3. Implement Self-Care Strategies: Introduce and demonstrate a range of self-care strategies and techniques, such as relaxation exercises, mindfulness practices, and assertiveness skills, empowering caregivers to mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue actively.
4. Apply Practical Solutions: Offer caregivers actionable, everyday strategies and approaches that they can implement to prevent, manage and alleviate the impact of compassion fatigue, ensuring their ongoing well-being and effectiveness in caregiving roles.

Definitions and common symptoms

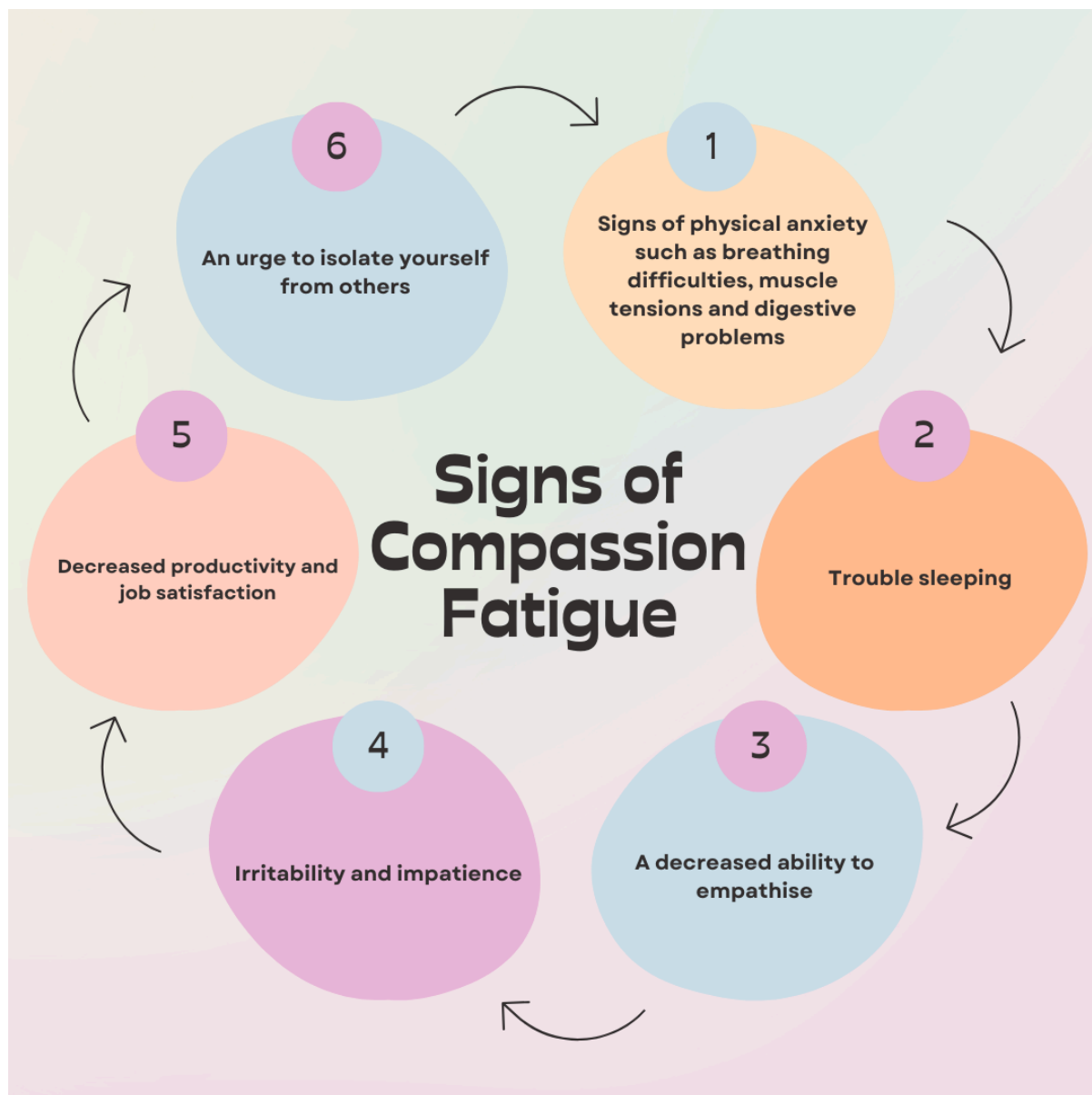
Compassion fatigue was first introduced by Charles Figley in the 1980s in psychology. Figley (1995) defines compassion fatigue as *“an identifiable set of negative psychological symptoms that caregivers experience as a result of providing care while being exposed to either primary trauma (experiencing the trauma firsthand) or secondary trauma (rendering care to those experiencing trauma).”*

Compassion fatigue is generally associated with ongoing, repeated exposure to traumatic situations, leading to the erosion of psychological resilience over time. Figley's (2002) Compassion Fatigue Process suggests that caregivers' concern and empathy expose them to emotional side effects due to prolonged caregiving in high-stress environments. Common symptoms may include:

- **Emotional Numbness**: A reduced ability to feel empathy and compassion, leading to detachment from oneself and others.
- **Chronic Exhaustion**: Persistent physical and emotional fatigue that does not improve with rest.
- **Reduced Sense of Accomplishment**: Feelings of ineffectiveness and questioning the value of one's work.
- **Depersonalization**: A sense of disconnection from personal identity and environment.
- **Irritability and Anxiety**: Increased irritability, heightened stress levels and difficulty managing emotions.
- **Sleep Disturbances**: Trouble falling or staying asleep, contributing to further fatigue.



- **Physical Ailments:** Frequent headaches, gastrointestinal issues and a weakened immune system.
- **Cognitive Impairments:** Difficulty concentrating, making decisions and remembering tasks.





Research by Crowther et al. (2014) found that the personal experiences of bereaved caregivers of family members with dementia highlighted both immediate and long-lasting effects of compassion fatigue. Caregivers' confidence in their ability to provide adequate care influenced their perception of the caregiving experience and increased their risk of developing depressive symptoms, thus increasing susceptibility to compassion fatigue.

Risk factors of compassion fatigue

Certain factors increase the risk of developing compassion fatigue among caregivers of the elderly. These risk factors can be personal, professional or environmental:

➤ Personal Factors

- High emotional demand from constant exposure to the decline and suffering of elderly individuals.
- A personal history of trauma or unresolved personal issues.
- Lack of sufficient emotional, social or organisational support systems.

➤ Professional Factors

- Long hours and high demands without adequate rest and respite.
- High-stress environments, lack of support from colleagues or supervisors and inadequate training in managing stress.

➤ Environmental Factors

- Personality traits include perfectionism, high empathy, and difficulty setting boundaries.
- Chronic exposure to suffering, high workload and insufficient resources or time to provide adequate care.

Research by Cocker and Joss (2016) on compassion fatigue among healthcare, emergency, and community service workers highlighted the critical role of regular **mindfulness practices**, **self-care** strategies, and structured **support systems** in preventing and managing compassion fatigue.

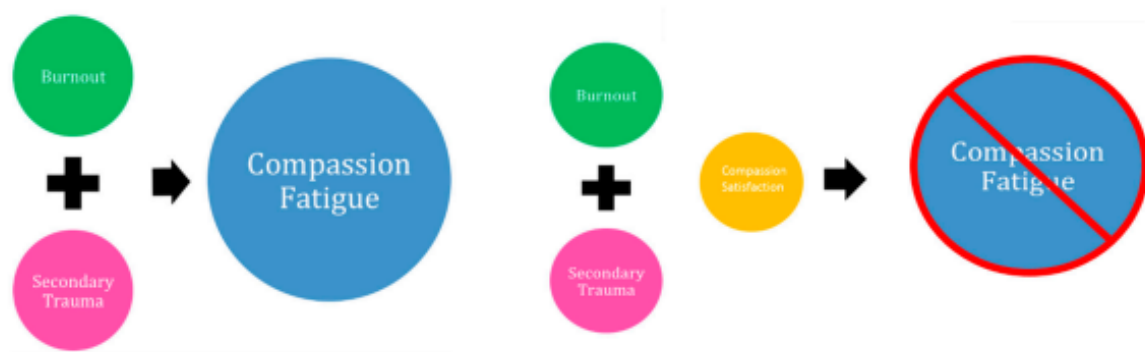


Figure 1. Compassion fatigue: conceptual model adapted from Middleton.

Effects of compassion fatigue at a personal and interpersonal level

Compassion fatigue can profoundly impact both personal well-being and interpersonal relationships:

➤ Personal Level:

- Mental Health: There is an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness. Best et al. (2020) examined the use of mindfulness practices among military nurse practitioners and found that such practices significantly reduced symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, indicating that mindfulness can be an effective intervention for caregivers across various settings, including eldercare.
- Physical Health: Greater susceptibility to illnesses and chronic conditions due to stress.
- Burnout: Complete physical and emotional exhaustion, reducing a sense of purpose and productivity.

➤ Interpersonal Level:

- Strained Relationships: Increased conflicts and reduced communication effectiveness with family, friends and care recipients.
- Social Withdrawal: Withdrawal from social activities and support networks.



- Decreased Quality of Care: Reduced ability to provide high-quality care due to exhaustion and emotional detachment.

Akbari Shaker et al. (2021) conducted a clinical trial to explore the effects of sharing experiences among family caregivers of the disabled elderly. The study found that sharing caregiving experiences with others in similar situations significantly reduced compassion fatigue, suggesting that support groups and shared experiences can mitigate stress.

2. Self-care strategies and techniques for caregivers of the elderly

Effective self-care is crucial for caregivers to manage compassion fatigue and maintain well-being. The following strategies and techniques can help:

➤ Relaxation Techniques

- Deep Breathing Exercises: To reduce stress, inhale deeply through the nose, hold for a few seconds, and exhale slowly through the mouth. [Video](#)
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Tense and then gradually relax different muscle groups in the body to reduce physical tension and stress.
- Meditation: Regular meditation practice calms the mind, reduces stress and improves overall emotional well-being.

➤ Mindfulness Practices

- Mindful Meditation: Focus on the present moment without judgement to manage stress and increase emotional resilience. Pérez et al. (2020) conducted a randomised controlled trial on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions for nurse caregivers of institutionalised older persons with dementia, demonstrating that mindfulness-based interventions significantly reduced compassion fatigue and burnout. This highlights the importance of incorporating mindfulness into caregiver support programs.
- Mindful Movement: Engage in physical activities like yoga, tai chi or walking with mindfulness to enhance relaxation and well-being.



- Mindful Breathing: Pay attention to the breath's natural rhythm as an anchor to stay present and grounded.

➤ **Assertiveness Skills**

- Setting Boundaries: Learn to say no and set limits to protect personal time and energy. For example, if a friend repeatedly asks for help when you are already busy, you might say, "I cannot help today, but maybe another time." Or in a work setting, try, "I'm unable to take on extra projects this month." Including specific language can make setting boundaries feel more approachable and realistic.
- Effective Communication: Clearly and respectfully express needs, concerns and boundaries to others to reduce stress and improve relationships. Using "I" statements can help communicate effectively without sounding accusatory. For instance, saying, "I feel overwhelmed when I handle all the tasks alone; could we split them up more evenly?" This phrasing conveys your feelings and encourages collaboration, making it easier for others to understand and respond positively.
- Social Support: Seek help from friends, family or professional services when needed for necessary respite and emotional support. Knowing when and how to reach out can make a difference - such as calling a friend for support after a challenging day or connecting with a mental health professional for guidance on managing longer-term stressors.

3. Practical, Everyday Actions to Prevent and Assuage the Effects of Compassion Fatigue

In addition to self-care techniques, caregivers can implement practical, everyday actions to prevent and ease the effects of compassion fatigue:

- Establish a consistent routine that includes self-care, rest.
- Seek professional support through counselling, therapy or support groups.
- Reflect on the caregiving role and find meaning in the work to stay motivated and connected to their purpose.
- Practise gratitude regularly to shift focus from stress to fulfilment.
- Engage in hobbies and interests outside caregiving to maintain a balanced life and reduce stress.



- Prioritise adequate rest and maintain a regular sleep schedule for physical and emotional recovery.
- Ensure a balanced diet and stay hydrated to support overall well-being.
- Regular physical activity improves physical health, reduces stress, and enhances mood.

Experience Sharing and Support Groups: Akbari Shaker et al. (2021) found that sharing caregiving experiences with others significantly reduced compassion fatigue. Engaging in support groups and sharing experiences can be valuable tools for caregivers to reduce stress and feel less isolated.

4. Practical/Further educational material: tools and resources for continuous self-care among caregivers.

Caregiving is both fulfilling and challenging. To ensure continuous support and education, various tools and resources are available to enhance caregivers' well-being and resilience:

- Interactive Self-Care Apps: Mobile applications offer guided meditation, breathing exercises, relaxation techniques and stress management tools specifically designed for caregivers (e.g. 'Insight Timer', 'Smiling Mind', 'MindShift CBT', 'Calm').
- Educational Videos and Webinars: Platforms like YouTube and caregiving-focused websites provide free videos and webinars on mindfulness, relaxation and managing caregiver stress.
 - ["Self-care for Caregivers | Linda Ercoli | TEDxUCLA"](#)
 - ["Ch. 7: Self-Care \(Caregiver College Video Series\)"](#)
- Support Groups and Online Communities: Join online forums and support groups where caregivers can share experiences, offer advice, and receive emotional support. Websites like '[Caregiver Action Network](#)', '[Eurocarers](#)' and social media groups provide a sense of community and connection, reducing feelings of isolation. **Eurocarers** – A European organization supporting caregivers by providing resources, community support, and advocacy for caregiver rights.
- Reflection Journals and Worksheets: Encourage the use of reflection journals or worksheets where caregivers can document their experiences, emotions and progress. Reflective practice can serve as a powerful tool for self-awareness and personal growth.



REFLECTION JOURNAL

DATE _____ S M T W T F S

WHAT CAREGIVING CHALLENGES DID I FACE TODAY?

1.
2.
3.

POSITIVE MOMENTS THAT MADE ME
HAPPY:

•
•
•

MY EMOTIONS TODAY:

joy	happiness
peace	sadness
anger	boredom
apathy	anxiety

WHAT COULD I DO DIFFERENTLY TO
BETTER SUPPORT MY OWN WELL-
BEING?

TODAY I'M GRATEFUL FOR...

•
•
•
•

- **Podcasts:** Listen to podcasts or audiobooks focused on caregiving, stress management, and personal development. These resources can be particularly useful for caregivers who prefer auditory learning or want to engage in self-care while on the go.

"Carewell Conversations : Second Series" (Eurocarers): A podcast that focuses on supporting caregivers, with episodes covering stress management, self-care, and coping strategies.



5. Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, caregivers should be able to:

- Identify the symptoms and risk factors associated with compassion fatigue in caregiving for the elderly.
- Recognize the impact of compassion fatigue on personal well-being and interpersonal relationships.
- Apply practical self-care strategies, including relaxation, mindfulness, and assertiveness skills.
- Utilise a variety of tools and resources for continuous self-care and support to enhance resilience and reduce the risk of burnout.

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