

# COMPASSION FATIGUE: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT?

## What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is what we call a secondary trauma response. In other words, compassion fatigue is a stress reaction that results from continually being subjected to the traumas of other people. Sound familiar? The very nature of a job in the fire service requires you to be in constant contact with the those experiencing traumatic reactions. In addition to that, there is an unwritten expectation that you will not *actually* be impacted by their trauma. This expectation says that your life outside of work will not be altered by your life inside of work - if you have lived a single day in the fire service, you know the falsity behind that expectation.

Given that the very nature of your job requires that you are in constant contact with trauma, what it also requires is that you become desensitized to certain aspects of that trauma. To a certain degree, this is a healthy coping mechanism. However, it can also be dangerous.

Listed below are some of the general signs and symptoms of Compassion Fatigue. If you begin to identify these things in your life, or you have experienced them get worse over time, you shouldn't wait any longer. Now is the time to reach out for support. You are not in this alone.

- Increased isolation: this could be isolation at work or at home
- Increase in stress responses in the body: headaches, chronic pain, gastrointestinal issues, chest pain, etc.
- Increase in the use of substances: may include sleep medication, alcohol, or any other substance used to numb the mind's response.
- Impact on sleep: increase OR decrease in one's ability to fall asleep as well the duration of sleep.





## What is Compassion Fatigue? (continued)

- Increase in emotional intensity: more extreme reactions to what used to be mild stressors.
- Decrease in feelings of worth and confidence.
- Increase in feelings of depression and sadness: often times leads to withdrawal or isolation.
- Increase in feelings of anger: can be directed towards the appropriate person, but can also be misdirected.
- Loss in your emotional center: what used to provide you with purpose and meaning no longer has the same impact on you and you find yourself wondering what all the effort is for.
- Reduction in your overall ability to feel for others: while you naturally will be desensitized to certain things by the nature of your job, this will make it feel like you have little to no ability to feel compassion or empathy for anyone in any given situation.

If you find yourself in any of the categories above, or if you scored higher than you would like on the Compassion Fatigue Self-Test know that there is still time to change your path. The key ingredient to a different tomorrow is realizing the things that need to change today. As long as you are courageous enough to try things that may be new to you, or are outside of your comfort zone, you can change your path moving forward.

You are not the first person to be in these shoes and you will not be the last. Reach out, get the support you need, and be the healthiest, happiest person you can be.

"Where you  
are a year  
from now is a  
reflection of  
the choices  
you choose to  
make right  
now"

UNKNOWN

