



DEEP DIVE:

# Compassion Fatigue

Moving beyond  
the problem  
toward  
professional  
resilience



Emily Hedrick Coaching and Consulting

# What is Compassion Fatigue?

A simple equation:



Secondary traumatic stress + burnout

Defined in 1995 by psychologist, Charles Figley, who described it as

“nearly identical to PTSD, except that it applies to those emotionally affected by the trauma of another.”

Humans who help other humans as a long-term profession (whether paid or unpaid) are at significant risk for developing compassion fatigue, and the results can be dire both personally and for helping industries on a larger scale.

## COMPASSION FATIGUE SYMPTOMS

	physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Digestive issues</li><li>• Chronic pain</li><li>• Exhaustion</li><li>• Sleep issues</li><li>• Substance abuse</li></ul>
	mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeling helpless and demoralized</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Detachment</li></ul>
	social health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strained personal relationships</li><li>• Social Isolation</li><li>• Losing interest in enjoyed activities</li></ul>



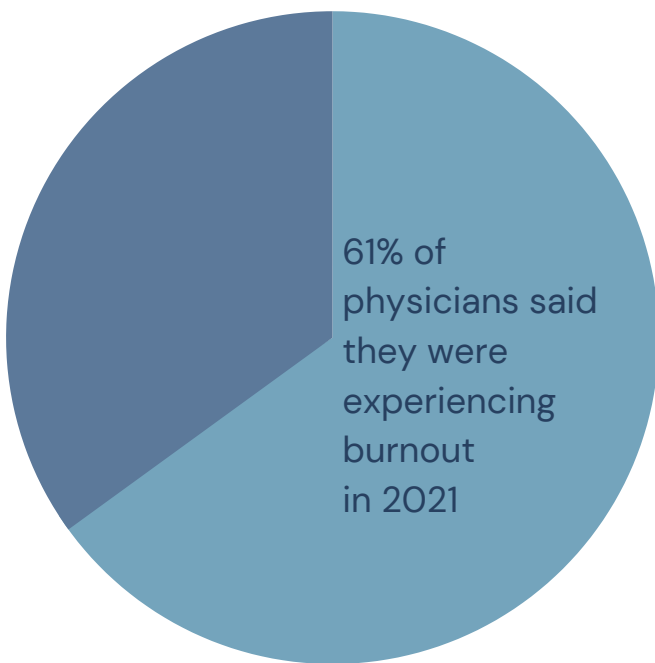
On a personal level, compassion fatigue can begin as emotional exhaustion causing less effectiveness at work. It's been found to affect social workers' responses to child abuse cases. Among RNs, compassion fatigue has been linked to

- decreased patient safety
- increased employee turnover
- increased errors
- decreased performance
- absenteeism
- impaired professionalism
- decreased staff and patient satisfaction
- substance abuse among RNs.

# National Hospital Turnover Rate

# 25.9%

**In helping industries, the effects of compassion fatigue look like high turnover rates and increased costs associated with constantly replacing employees.**



**1 in 3**

Medical practices had physicians retiring early or leaving due to burnout in 2021

And it's getting worse. In 2022, the rate went up 4 percentage points to 65%.



**\$46,100**

how much it costs to  
replace a bedside RN

**\$5.2–9 million**

How much hospitals lose each year  
replacing RNs

**The more compassion fatigue, the  
worse an organization's bottom line.**

Likelihood of  
nurses leaving  
their jobs per  
point on the  
emotional  
exhaustion scale

**↑12%**



# Addressing compassion fatigue organizationally more than pays for itself.



nurses stay 20% longer

at hospitals with burnout reduction programs than nurses at hospitals without such initiatives - University of Virginia study

hospitals save

**\$5,144**

per year **per nurse** when effective burnout reduction plans are implemented organizationally

Imagine what kinds of results we have yet to explore for social workers, chaplains, therapists, and administrative staff.

# Forward-Facing<sup>®</sup> Professional Resilience addresses the root of compassion fatigue.

Many burnout prevention programs focus on self-care or environmental change to resolve compassion fatigue. Both can be helpful interventions, but neither get to the root of compassion fatigue: nervous systems on the fritz.

**When we focus on self-care without dealing first with an overactive nervous system, every self-care task becomes another stress-inducing demand.**

When we focus on environmental change, hope for today is nearly impossible because it takes time to change complicated systems such as medical care or other human and animal service fields.

While administrative change is absolutely necessary for long-term sustainability of any strained system, nurses, doctors, therapists, social workers, chaplains, and other helping professionals are not suffering in the future. They're suffering in the present. **All facilities benefit from providing their staff with the skills to get them through today so that those same staff can be there to create and benefit from a sustainable tomorrow.**



Forward-Facing®  
Professional Resilience  
utilizes the

# Accelerated Recovery Program

Dr. Gentry, Dr. Baranowsky, and Dr. Kathleen Dunning created the Accelerated Recovery Program for compassion fatigue prevention and recovery for individuals. Over the years, it has been expanded so that large groups of people can experience relief in one 6-hour workshop.

Training-as-treatment through the ARP has been proven more effective for treating and preventing compassion fatigue than:

## Training-as-Treatment Workshops

This training-as-treatment approach has over 11 peer-reviewed studies touting its effectiveness.

The workshop utilizes education and skill-building to provide professional helpers with internal safety equipment (self-regulation and perceptual maturation) as they encounter the inevitable toxic environments inhabited by the people they help.

- didactic and ecologic music therapy interventions
- grief resolution
- Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation
- mindfulness education



# The Heart of the Accelerated Recovery Program

Autonomic nervous system education and application of skills to befriend the body are what set this training apart from many other burnout-reduction programs. **Even a bubble bath can be stressful if our bodies are perceiving threat in everyday life when there is no empirical danger**, so can coffee with a friend or colleague.

In addition to developing five resilience skills, the Professional Resilience workshop involves an initial self-assessment for compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion satisfaction.

You may notice that self-care and revitalization is not left out of the program completely, but it's put in its rightful place: inaccessible until participants have developed other skills for detoxifying their interactions with their work environment.

With a new set of skills that are immediately applicable in the workplace, studies show that the relief from symptoms of compassion fatigue come as soon as the workshop is complete and stick around even longer.





# Results after attending a 4-hour workshop including content from the ARP:

## Nurses in 4 different residency programs

showed increased compassion satisfaction and decreased secondary traumatic stress and burnout from baseline to 2-months post intervention. 2 of the 4 also showed favorable outcomes with a 6-month follow-up.

## Emergency nurses in 2 Colorado hospitals

showed 10% improvement in compassion satisfaction, 34% improvement in burnout symptoms, 19% improvement in secondary traumatic stress symptoms

## Non-human animal care professionals

(veterinarians, and animal shelter staff) experienced a statistically significant decrease in negative symptoms related to burnout and secondary traumatic stress as a result of this training-as-treatment intervention.

## A systemic hospital-wide resiliency program

lessened burnout and secondary traumatic stress while increasing compassion satisfaction for participants.

You can find even more studies explore the effects of this training-as-treatment method listed in the references for this paper.



“High-performing organizations require healthy and engaged employees.

The development and implementation of systemic prevention and treatment efforts for CF, including ongoing education, support, and intervention programs for health care staff, are valuable investments of health care organization resources.

Such efforts can go beyond the impact on the well-being of individual nurses and can also impact larger organizational issues, such as staff turnover, staff satisfaction, and patient satisfaction”

*Potter, Deshields, and Rodriguez, 2013.*



*If you're looking to save your organization money from turnover costs while enriching and enhancing the well-being of your staff,*

the Forward-Facing<sup>®</sup>  
Professional Resilience  
Workshop provides a low-  
cost intervention that can  
bring you significant results in  
just one day.

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# Appendix A: *Details about each resilience skill*

## Self-regulation

**In practicing self-regulation, you can get your rational thinking back on line so that you can make choices about your work and achieve understanding needed for major perceptual shifts in order to prevent burnout.**

It is needlessly difficult to pursue the remaining four skills without developing self-regulation first. Self-regulation is about physically interrupting an overactive threat response. Learning self-regulation involves developing body awareness and employing acute relaxation skills. This kind of relaxation is different than taking time out of your day for a nice long meditation or a hot bath. Instead, it involves releasing constricted muscles in real time, moment to moment.

## Intentionality

**Intentionality is directly related to compassion satisfaction and gives purpose to self-regulation practice**

During the Professional Resilience workshop, participants get the opportunity to articulate why they are doing the work they are doing in the first place. Through that intentionality, it becomes easier to make decisions at work that are aligned with a personal value system rather than automatic reactions to perceived demands.

## Perceptual Maturation

**By far the most difficult to develop of all of these skills, perceptual maturation helps participants reclaim their locus of control as well as their ability to decide how they function in any work environment.**

By reclaiming their locus of control and working intentionally, they can protect themselves from the exhaustion of an endless to-do list – including bigger picture problems that may feel like their responsibility even when they can't be solved alone.

## Connection & Support

**We can't do difficult work alone.**

Many professionals, out of shame or the illusion of professionalism, end up isolating themselves when they are overwhelmed by what they witness in their work with clients. Preventing secondary traumatic stress involves developing a robust support system with people who can hold space for storytelling when we witness traumatic stress in others.

This support system is most effective when done intentionally, and the workshop offers options to help participants establish that for prevention of secondary traumatic stress in the future.

## Self-care and Revitalization

**Many people that go into helping professions have never learned to care for themselves.**

When we don't take care of ourselves, we have nothing to offer others. Self-care and Revitalization involves creating concrete plans and habits of tending to physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and professional health.



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