Compassion Fatigue
A presentation for nurses
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Why should we as nurses be concerned about compassion fatigue?

Objectives
- Define the concepts of compassion fatigue (CF), burnout, and compassion satisfaction
- List the possible causes and contributing factors for compassion fatigue
- Propose strategies to reverse and reduce compassion fatigue

Presentation Overview
- Exploration of relevant concepts with further explanation through case reports
- Discussion of contributing factors
- Signs of compassion fatigue
- Interventions for compassion fatigue

Compassion and Empathy
Isn’t this why we went into nursing?

Compassion:
- Sympathetic consciousness of other’s distress, together with a desire to alleviate it

Empathy:
- An emotional engagement
- Highly present
- Sensitive attuned
- Heartfelt

- Can be emotionally and professionally devastating
- Causes are unavoidable in nursing
- Difficult to recognize unless aware of compassion fatigue
- Lack of recognition inhibits effective treatment

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Compassion Satisfaction

- The pleasure derived from the work of helping others
- Symbiotic relationship between nurse and patient

CF is progressive and cumulative
Compassion discomfort (temporary, removable by rest) ⇒ Compassion stress (Stress level increases and endurance decreases) ⇒ Compassion fatigue

The Cost of Caring
“Compassion fatigue is a state where the compassionate energy that is expended has surpassed restorative processes.”
(Coetzee, 2010, p. 237)

Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder
- State of exhaustion and dysfunction
- Directly related to traumatic patient experiences
- Manifest symptoms similar to PTSD
  - depression
  - generalized anxiety
  - avoidance
  - hyper-arousal

Burnout

Burnout = mental distress and ↓ work performance

Related to:
- Frustration
- Powerlessness
- Inability to achieve work goals

Burnout r/t:
Patient Contact & Use of Self
- Frequent/inappropriate anger
- Apathy/Indifference
- Unresponsiveness
- Irritability
- Depression
- Sleep difficulty
- Concentration
- Energy
- Absences

STSD r/t:
Traumatic events
- Powerlessness
- Cynicism
- Detachment

Burnout r/t:
Work Environment
Case Report 1

Sarah has worked as a nurse for a medical surgical unit for 7 years. She takes care of many different patients with different needs throughout her work week. The unit is very busy. In addition, the patients on Sarah’s unit are very sick, terminally ill or dying and need intense emotional support.

Over time the emotional strain of her patients’ pain and anguish leads to compassion discomfort, and her enthusiasm and sensitivity towards patients’ needs begins to diminish. She eventually becomes emotionally overwhelmed, evoking the desire to stay uninvolved and disconnected from patients’ suffering. She no longer cries over the loss of a patient or provides emotional support. She has become compassion fatigued.

Case Report 2: Letter from a patient

I felt a bit like this ol’ dog; I had complete faith and trust in you! Thank you for being my night nurse during my recuperation from the splenectomy and hysterectomy. I’m getting stronger. Tomorrow begins the second phase of the healing—chemotherapy. Tonight, as I prepare for this transition, I am so grateful to all the nurses who took such excellent post-op care of me. I am especially grateful to you—your willingness to calm me by talking with me. God bless you for your compassion and intelligence.

CF and Compassion Satisfaction

Negative correlation between CF and compassion satisfaction

Possible CF Associations

1. Personal Factors
2. Patient Conditions
3. System Issues
**Personal Factors**

- Ethnicity
- Experience
- Coping strategies

**Patient Conditions**

- Patients experiencing serious physical, emotional, financial threats, or imminent death
- Challenging behaviors such as confusion, combative and aggressive behavior
- Futile care, aggressive medical care despite of patient diagnosis

**System Issues**

**System Issues Associated with ↑ CF**

- 8 hour shifts
- ↑ number of days worked
- ↑ census
- ↑ acuity
- Heavy patient assignments

**Possible Signs of CF**

- Physical
- Emotional
- Social
- Intellectual

**Physical**

- Accident prone
- Exhaustion
- Headaches
- Difficulty in falling and staying asleep
- Susceptibility to infection

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Emotional

- Anger to frequent or intense for the situation\(^1,5\)
- Apathetic\(^1,3\)
- Desire to leave nursing\(^1,3\)
- Depression\(^1,3\)
- Irritability\(^1,3\)

Social Effects\(^3\)

- Unresponsiveness
- Callousness
- Indifference
- Avoidance of emotionally charged situations
- Isolation

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Interventional Strategies

*What can we do now?*

Personal

- Self-awareness
- Self-care

Professional

- Responses at work
- Reaching out to colleagues
- Consider the patient

Personal: Focus on self-awareness and self-care…what you have control over

Self-Awareness

A combination of self-knowledge and dual-awareness, the clinician can monitor patient needs, work environment, and his or her own experience….it is a psychological process that may expand one's range of choices and allow for more creative responses.\(^7\)

How can I cultivate self-awareness?

Formal interventions

- Mindful Meditation
- Reflective Writing

Informal interventions

- Suggestions from the experts
Mindful Meditation

"A process of developing careful attention to minute shifts in body, mind, emotions, and environs while holding a kind, nonjudgmental attitude toward self and others."
(Kearney, 2009, p. 1160)

“The only way to learn compassion is through our own broken hearts, we have to back up and pass through our own pain.”
(Matthew Fox)

Reflective Writing

Writing in an emotional way is a form of self-care that increases self-awareness by promoting reflection.

Informal: Suggestions from the experts
- Allow yourself to have personal time
- Set priorities and maintain balance
- Prompt yourself to do some act of centering each day
- Understand your own mortality and abilities
- Be reasonable about what you can and cannot do

Self-Care: Personal Strategies

“The heart must first pump blood to itself”
(Shauna Shapiro)

Maintain a healthy lifestyle
- Eat well balanced meals
- Get enough sleep
- Exercise
Nurture social relationships

- Engage in community activities
- Make time to connect with friends and family
- Take time to laugh and have fun
- Participate in faith communities

Seek out Calming and Restful Experiences

- Develop hobbies and interests
- Enjoy music, reading, gardening
- Appreciate nature
- Consider counseling
- Discover your own spirituality
- Get massages

Professional Strategies: to utilize at work

- Accept your reactions as normal responses to specialized work
- Appreciate the importance and meaning of your work
- Reward yourself after a stressful situation or completing a task
- Stay connected to the outside world
- Develop a role shedding ritual
- Give yourself time to take a break

Reach out to colleagues

Because they have been there too

- Debrief with colleagues to help deal with emotions after a traumatic event
- Consider forming a CF support group
- Develop a supportive environment
- Take time talking with an experienced colleague to discuss patient situations
- Have a realistic tolerance of failure
Realize when Enough is Enough

- Trade assignments
- Consider reducing hours, and amount of days worked
- Switch shifts
- Take vacations

Consider the patient

Help renew your sense of compassion satisfaction

Set and maintain clear limits and boundaries on therapeutic relationships

- Focus on patient’s strengths and good qualities rather than their distress and negative qualities
- Deliberately make connections with patients, use humor, look for something unique in a patient’s room, or notice the patient’s birth date or age
- Find a way to touch the patient during a visit or assessment to help you feel connected

In Conclusion....

All nurses are at risk for compassion fatigue, and must be empowered to avoid and overcome it

“You can gain control over this problem only through real changes in your outlook and reaction to the stress in nursing. Periodically reflect, assess, nurture, and renew yourself so you’ll stay emotionally fit” (Joinson, 1992, p. 121)

Any Questions?
References

References continued
Self-Care Assessment Worksheet

This assessment tool provides an overview of effective strategies to maintain self-care. After completing the full assessment, choose one item from each area that you will actively work to improve.

Using the scale below, rate the following areas in terms of frequency:

- 5 = Frequently
- 4 = Occasionally
- 3 = Rarely
- 2 = Never
- 1 = It never occurred to me

Physical Self-Care

___ Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast, lunch and dinner)
___ Eat healthy
___ Exercise
___ Get regular medical care for prevention
___ Get medical care when needed
___ Take time off when needed
___ Get massages
___ Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity that is fun
___ Take time to be sexual—with yourself, with a partner
___ Get enough sleep
___ Wear clothes you like
___ Take vacations
___ Take day trips or mini-vacations
___ Make time away from telephones
___ Other:

Psychological Self-Care

___ Make time for self-reflection
___ Have your own personal psychotherapy
___ Write in a journal
___ Read literature that is unrelated to work
___ Do something at which you are not expert or in charge
___ Decrease stress in your life

___ Let others know different aspects of you
___ Notice your inner experience—listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
___ Engage your intelligence in a new area, e.g. go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports event, auction, theater performance
___ Practice receiving from others
___ Be curious
___ Say “no” to extra responsibilities sometimes
___ Other:

**Emotional Self-Care**

___ Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
___ Stay in contact with important people in your life
___ Give yourself affirmations, praise yourself
___ Love yourself
___ Re-read favorite books, re-view favorite movies
___ Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
___ Allow yourself to cry
___ Find things that make you laugh
___ Express your outrage in social action, letters and donations, marches, protests
___ Play with children
___ Other:

**Spiritual Self-Care**

___ Make time for reflection
___ Spend time with nature
___ Find a spiritual connection or community
___ Be open to inspiration
___ Cherish your optimism and hope
___ Be aware of nonmaterial aspects of life
___ Try at times not to be in charge or the expert
___ Be open to not knowing

Identify what in meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
Meditate
Pray
Sing
Spend time with children
Have experiences of awe
Contribute to causes in which you believe
Read inspirational literature (talks, music, etc.)
Other:

Workplace or Professional Self-Care
Take a break during the workday (e.g. lunch)
Take time to chat with co-workers
Make quiet time to complete tasks
Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
Set limits with your clients and colleagues
Balance your caseload so that no one day or part of a day is “too much”
Arrange your work space so it is comfortable and comforting
Get regular supervision or consultation
Negotiate for your needs (benefits, pay raise)
Have a peer support group
Develop a non-trauma area of professional interest
Other:

Balance
Strive for balance within your work-life and workday
Strive for balance among work, family, relationships, play and rest

Questions for Case Report #1:

1. Can you identify with any of Sarah’s story?

2. What are your stress triggers at work?

Questions for Case Report #2:

1. What are some patient experiences that evoke feelings of compassion satisfaction?

2. How do these experiences help you cope better with patient demands? How do these experiences affect you and your ability to continue nursing?