

Compassion fatigue in medicine: The result of an inner wear and tear

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Compassion is an inner desire to alleviate the suffering of the other. Almost all of us as health care professionals had this feeling in some corner of our hearts when we chose this profession. It is no doubt a daunting task, but something within us made us feel we can help and make a difference. It is very palpable at the beginning of our careers. As a physician and an academic hospitalist, I observed medical students often having a great rapport with patients and families. Is it their enthusiasm to learn? Is it their ability to spend time with patients? Perhaps it is a combination of the joy of learning coupled with their willing hearts to open up to patients and families. Why does it change later? As we advance in our medical careers, the reality of day-to-day tasks, responsibilities, too many roles to play make a significant impact on us and perhaps slowly exhaust our resources and inner energies. It gradually erodes our interior. This leads to inner wear and tear. Our inner frustrations silently settle within ourselves and unknowingly conceal the very reason why we chose this profession. The reasons could be many, but this is one of the biggest challenges currently faced by health care.

As a result, some new terms are increasingly being heard such as empathy fatigue and compassion fatigue. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others. This involves recognition of situation of the other and being with them. It is the presence that matters a lot for many. Then comes the next step of having a desire to alleviate the situation. When that takes the form of action, then it is compassion in action. Thus, empathy and compassion go hand in hand in almost every situation. Now where do these qualities reside and why do we experience fatigue? Every situation or circumstance has the

potential to put on an additional layer over one's own heart and takes us closer to empathy and compassion fatigue. It is the heart that is the seat of these qualities of empathy and compassion. Anyone who has experienced a heart-breaking situation knows where they felt the pain – in their heart. It is the seat of emotions. It is also the source of remedy. It is the source of unlocking our potential. All that is needed is to remove the layers of blockages. We can then find that there is a limitless source of compassion with each one of us.

Emotional exhaustion is one of the primary drivers of burnout. It is the exhaustion of our emotional resources. Exhaustion is from carrying the burden of heavier emotions. Frustrations, and disappointments, leading to anger and other unhealthy inner states can become a vicious cycle. In my experience with Heartfulness meditation, I found that it is possible to have an emotional reset each day. It helps us fill up the gas tank to get through the days challenges and offers the possibility of letting go of the emotional burdens of the day. It is possible to replenish those resources by tapping into our own hearts and finding a way to cultivate empathy and compassion that deep within ourselves. It then becomes our nature and therefore does not need any effort at all to be empathetic or compassionate. These qualities radiate from us without any conscious effort leading to an effortless empathy and compassion!

Thank you!
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