

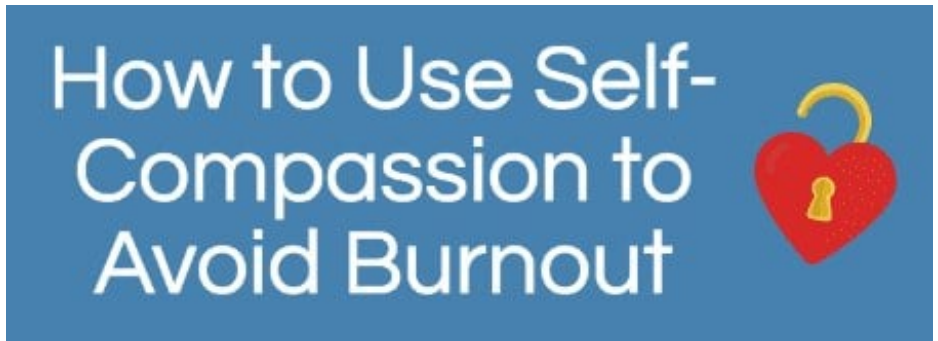
Self-Compassion as an Antidote to Empathy Fatigue

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Are you a mental health professional or caregiver? Would you like to know how to avoid burnout or compassion fatigue?



Many of us know that we need to watch out for compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995) but are at a loss on how to do this. Compassion fatigue is “a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme

state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.”

Contrary to Figley, Kristin Neff, Ph.D argues in her “Art of Self-Compassion: Accepting your Imperfections,” workshop that there is no such thing as compassion fatigue. You cannot feel too much compassion for yourself or others. There is only empathy fatigue. This post will provide you with some of Neff’s simple techniques for preventing empathy fatigue as you care for patients, clients or loved ones.

Empathy refers to the ability to feel others’ feelings. It is thanks to mirror neurons that our brains can read others’ emotions and create empathetic resonance. Without taking sufficient precautions, as you are caring for people who are in pain, over time, you can suffer and experience burnout.

Matthieu Ricard explains empathy in the two minute video below.

Traditionally, [self-care](#) consists of: good nutrition, sufficient rest, exercise, play, setting boundaries, getting supervision, socializing, massage and yoga. While it is beneficial to include as many of these components as possible in your routine/life, there is a limitation to these methods. They are off-the-job and can not be done while actually caregiving.

Neff recommends employing self-compassion as an oxygen mask in the moment, during the actual presence of suffering. This on-the-job approach is a sustainable method of self-care. Self-kindness entails giving ourselves the same kindness and care we’d give a good friend.

As a caregiver and/or mental health professional, this means giving yourself some soothing words of support at the very moment you’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed with another person’s suffering such as:

It’s so hard for me to hear this right now. It’s so painful.

You may also include part, all (or an adaptation) of the serenity prayer: “May I have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Another alternative is to employ the [Soothing Touch/Self-Compassion Break](#), or the [Coping with Difficult Emotion Exercise](#).

Using one of the above-mentioned self-compassion practices will enable you to nurture yourself while you’re nurturing others.

If you only experience empathy for others' suffering with no loving compassion for yourself, you resonate with the pain of others and have nothing to balance yourself and therefore develop empathy fatigue. However, when you give yourself loving-kindness, you have a protective buffer from the negative effects of feeling the suffering.

Self-compassion provides you with the [emotional resources](#) to care for others. As you start practicing self-compassion for yourself when you come into contact with someone else's suffering, you will be further helping your client, patient or loved one.

Wondering how self-compassionate you are? Take this [quiz](#) to find out!

Additional Practices to Boost Your Well-Being

Celebrate what's good!

For survival reasons, our brains have a strong negativity bias. This means that we're more likely to note and remember negative things to positive things at a seven to one ratio.

Fortunately, our brains are also trainable (plastic); therefore, we can train ourselves to focus more on the positive by taking the time to savor the good and positive things and feelings we see and experience. In addition, a [gratitude practice](#) increases one's happiness and well-being.

Appreciate what's good about ourselves

Take the time to become a good friend to yourself. Acknowledge when you're doing something nice and/or when things are going well.

Recognize and be grateful for your own good qualities. Every human being has good qualities; part of being human means having good qualities.

Lastly, playing small does not serve the world or yourself. Marianne Williamson addresses this beautifully below:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

How to Use Self-Compassion to Avoid Burnout



What Is Self-Compassion?



Self-compassion entails giving ourselves "the same kindness and care we'd give a good friend," as per Kristin Neff, PhD,

Use Self-Compassion to Avoid Burnout

Is an on-the-job self-care method

Refuels your body and heart

Increases capacity to care for clients, patients or loved ones



Simple Self-Compassion Exercise

Employ Soothing Hand Gesture



- One hand on top of other on heart
- One hand on heart & one on belly
- Both hands on belly/rub belly
- Both hands cradling face
- One hand holding other hand
- Arms around shoulders (hugging self)

Gently Say to Self:

It's so hard for me to hear/watch this

It's so painful

Serenity prayer: "May I have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Also, for Greater Wellbeing

Celebrate what's good in life

Practice gratitude

Appreciate what's good about self



Reference:

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