



Avoiding compassion fatigue: staying compassionate without emotional overload

Shannon Ferber *

Abstract: Human rights work demands deep compassion, often leading to emotional overwhelm. To avoid burnout and fatigue, it is worth exploring relevant steps for maintaining balance and well-being in such an emotionally demanding profession.

The work of recognising and defending human rights often attracts those who possess and prioritise a strong sense of compassion. This ability to understand and share the perspectives and feelings of others is inherent to the work itself but can often leave us feeling overwhelmed and depleted. What are some tips to maintain balance in an emotionally demanding line of work?

A note on terms: empathy and compassion are often used interchangeably. [Empathy](#) refers to an identification with, or awareness of, the thoughts and feelings of another person, while [compassion](#) implies this understanding along with a desire to take action and help alleviate suffering or stress. I will be using 'compassion' throughout this piece to refer to the nature of human rights work being action-oriented.

What is compassion fatigue?

The [American Bar Association](#) provides a useful definition for us to begin with. Compassion fatigue is

the cumulative physical, emotional and psychological effect of exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity, with the strain and stress of everyday life.

* Shannon is a human rights professional working in community engagement and education, with a focus on environmental and climate issues. Shannon is a graduate of the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation ([EMA](#)) at the Global Campus of Human Rights

Compassion fatigue can occur when someone who usually feels motivated to help others (through work or in their personal life) feels [unable to do](#) so. Compassion fatigue is also called ‘secondary stress reaction’ or ‘secondary traumatic stress’ due to its prevalence in careers that deal with high-stress situations.

Compassion fatigue is also distinct from [burnout](#). The latter is often predictable and builds up over time, across more general strains and pressure at work, while compassion fatigue is specifically associated with repeated exposure specifically to emotionally challenging topics and material.

Compassion fatigue in human rights work

On a good day, empathy and compassion can be accessed in manageable doses. However, when accessing compassion is also a key requisite for professional work, finding a balance becomes more difficult. Add in personal relationships, constant news alerts, and exposure to information on a wide variety of stress-inducing topics, and the supply of energy for compassion can be spilled by mid-morning.

While compassion fatigue is most often associated with [health care professionals](#), anyone can experience compassion fatigue. Rooted in ‘the recognition of [the inherent dignity](#)’ of all humans, the field of human rights attracts those with a strong sense of compassion, empathy, and justice. Many of us take a sense of pride in such traits, especially in a world which seeks to challenge and undermine such dignity in a vast number of ways.

Doctors, lawyers, social workers, and, of course, [human rights professionals](#), often deal with first- and second-hand accounts of trauma as part of their daily work, leaving them susceptible to compassion fatigue. It would be incredibly concerning, however, if they *were not* impacted in some way by the nature of their work. The trick lies in making sure these impacts do not disarm the ability to do the work itself.

This tendency to care—and care deeply—necessitates that people take care of themselves. As the adage goes, you cannot pour from an empty cup. Thus, what can human rights workers do when the very trait that brings them to do the work becomes one that leaves them feeling depleted, worn out, and disconnected?

Common symptoms of compassion fatigue

- Constantly feeling overwhelmed and powerless to help others
- Feeling emotionally detached from others, or noticing a reduced ability to react to bad news or support others
- A prolonged desire to draw away from or avoid work
- Increased feelings of cynicism, embitterment, or irritation towards your work
- Physical and/or emotional exhaustion

If compassion fatigue lingers unaddressed, it may have negative effects on a person’s health, relationships, life outlook, and sense of personal value or pride in the work concerned.

Addressing compassion fatigue

It is important to first identify whether the symptoms one notices comes from general burnout or are [indicative](#) of compassion fatigue. It is advisable to take some time to observe one's emotional and physical responses to work and speak to a trusted professional who can help identify symptoms and devise a plan to address them.

To address compassion fatigue at a deeper level, it can help to start by examining the underlying conditions that contribute to compassion fatigue, including:

- deprioritising personal needs, including rest
- poorly enforced boundaries around time-off
- dealing with multiple stressors at once

Once one recognises the imbalances that contribute to, or worsen, compassion fatigue, steps can be taken to set up systems that help nurture personal energy levels and ensure longer-term resilience. As suggested by several sources such as the Asian Journal of Nursing Education and Research ([AJNER](#)) and the National Library of Medicine ([NLM](#)), smaller steps can also be taken to alleviate symptoms of compassion fatigue, including:

- **Getting proper rest and nutrition.** Physical imbalances often spill over into mental and emotional balances, and vice versa. It is recommended to make sure that one is eating well, moving their body and getting adequate rest to set themselves up for navigating daily challenges. There are also different [kinds of rest](#) to consider.
- **Asking for help.** Speaking to trusted colleagues and management can help reduce feelings of isolation and facilitate a collaborative approach to setting up systems or support groups that help avoid compounding compassion fatigue.
- **Seeking avenues for connection.** Whether by connecting with other people, nature, or getting in touch more deeply with oneself, finding ways to nurture one's relationship can provide insights on the challenges faced and serve as a reminder that nobody is alone.

Looking forward

Empathy and compassion are some of the most valuable resources anyone can offer—across personal and professional life—and, like all resources, must be well-looked after. Personal vigilance is an important component in prevention, but employers play a significant role in maintaining and nurturing staff wellbeing. Providing adequate mental health support, promoting cultural awareness, and introducing support systems are crucial first steps to ensuring employees are properly cared for.

Human rights professionals confront a myriad of shifting challenges as human rights around the globe continue to be threatened. With the number of overt and explicit threats faced each day, it is important not to ignore those which might not be so obvious.