



## Caring without Tiring

### Dealing with compassion fatigue burnout in teaching

Compassion fatigue is a form of burnout prevalent in the caring professions. The personal connections, the responsibility for student learning, the passion of teachers to deliver excellent instruction in often under-supported positions, all make teachers prone to compassion fatigue. This article sheds light on the personal and systemic ways compassion fatigue manifests. It also explores the culture of care as it is expressed in teaching and engages teacher reflection to reframe teaching practice, as a step in preventing this type of burnout.

We care. That's why we teach. Teaching is giving of your skills and talents so students can discover and develop the best of theirs. Sometimes this giving feels energizing, and sometimes it leaves us drained. Do you relate to any of these statements about teaching?

- I want to help students reach their full potential.
- Through teaching, I want to make a difference in kids' lives and a better society.
- Through teaching, I want to redress the wrongs that I (or others) suffered in school.
- I believe teachers have a primary influence on the development of children.
- I tend to be a person who feels guilty easily.
- I have tendencies towards perfectionism.
- Difficult student situations (trauma, homelessness, bullying) affect me very deeply.
- My personal identity is strongly wrapped up in my career as a teacher.
- I feel emotionally stressed when I consider the how systemic realities negatively impact my ability to teach students.

If these statements ring true, it simply means that you are a caring, hard-working teacher who takes pride in what you do. It also means you are at risk of suffering from compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a form of burnout characterized by extreme mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion, and it's an occupational hazard in the caring professions, where people hold themselves to a high level of integrity and service in their work. Compassion is empathy coupled with the desire to relieve another's suffering. Showing compassion is a regular part of teaching. But isn't caring supposed to make you feel good and energized, not tired?

Educator and author Parker Palmer rightly says it takes courage to teach. But sometimes we may think we are being courageously compassionate, when we are actually being unnecessarily hard on ourselves, having unrealistic expectations, or putting up with situations that are unhealthy. It takes more than courage to teach – it takes awareness. Heart-centered teachers deliver caring, intelligent, passionate and high-quality instruction to students. The source of the ability to perform that kind of work is within the individual teacher. This source can be drained by personal overwork

or by the response to the demands of an educational system that overworks and under-supports teachers. Students learn when teachers care, but when passionate teachers burn out from compassion fatigue, no one wins. Teacher engagement is diminished, student learning is compromised, and school environments suffer.

To be listened to and understood by management, to be respected and valued for one's efforts, to be adequately funded and supported to be able to do your job well: these are some requirements for job satisfaction. When budgets for educational services and support are cut, teachers are left to do more, with a more vulnerable student population, with fewer resources and less assistance. A lack of Educational Assistants, lack of timely educational testing for students who are struggling academically, and limited budgets for materials (causing teachers to feel compelled to spend out-of-pocket) are examples of stressful impacts of inadequate budgets. Funding cuts to services that support youth and families are also felt in the classroom, since teachers are on the front lines of support. Teachers know that kids who are hungry don't learn well, that students who don't have community activities to connect with feel alienated, that cuts in social services affect families in need. We have empathy – and that is exactly why it is difficult to keep compassion fatigue in check.

The solution is not for an individual to try to compensate for the inadequacies of the system by working into a state of burnout. Heroics are for emergency situations. If heroics are required on a daily basis, then the solution is systemic change, not an increasingly impossible load of responsibility placed on teachers. Lasting progress is made when teachers and other stakeholders in the education system join forces to understand and improve conditions for both teachers and students.

### **Finding the balance**

But systemic change is slow. In the meantime, we need to create healthy responses to the triggers that stress us emotionally. Does this mean you will never go above and beyond the call of duty to make a difference in the life of a student? Absolutely not. Every teacher has stories of extraordinary acts of caring that impacted the life of a student in a significant way. This is a good thing! But if our acts of caring leave us emotionally drained to the point that our personal and professional lives are in distress, we need to re-think how we express our ethic of care in the context of teaching. The following thoughts and suggestions can help teachers find the balance between caring and personal health.

**You are not an island.** As teachers, we can make a huge impact in a child's life. Compassionate teachers can go into overdrive in their zeal to make that impact. Sometimes a misplaced sense of "if I don't, no one will" and ensuing guilt spur our actions. When you find yourself drawn into this feeling, consider what the other factors are, other than your contribution, to the student's outcome. Being responsible for students entails the ability to respond, not the ability to take everything on. The teacher isn't the only factor in making a shift in a student's life. It doesn't mean you don't do your job – you do it to the best of your ability. But you realize that others also have a role to play.

**You are not the parent.** Teaching happens within a culture of care. Teaching (like other caring professions, such as nursing and social work) is still culturally seen as "women's work," and sexist norms of feminine behaviour continue to influence the standards by which all teachers (male and female) are expected to fulfil their roles. Zhang, for example, identified the tendency to define teachers by their roles of caring and mothering over the role of educating.<sup>[1]</sup> However, teachers are not parents to their students. To blur this distinction is to diminish the important, yet very different, roles of both parents and teachers. Being caring is essential, but it takes more than caring to negotiate the complex web of relationships, skills and professional responsibilities in teachers' working lives. It is good personal and professional development to reflect on whether our personal expression of care enhances or hinders our ability to teach effectively.

**Find your boundaries.** We need to meet student needs and teach within healthy limits. Teaching is demanding work and being compassionate sometimes requires personal sacrifice. We might sacrifice a lunch hour to coach, a weekend to mark or a needed prep time to talk to an anxious student. But when we gift students or our school with our time and energy, we need to be sure we can replenish that energy and that we are not harming ourselves in the process of giving that gift. Setting boundaries to work within is a key strategy to managing our time and energy.

Setting professional boundaries is not about pushing people out or being unkind. Establishing boundaries allows us to teach compassionately with less internal stress, and leaves us with enough energy for our own needs. Decide your boundaries based on:

- the resources, supports and time available, not on unrealistic or idealistic expectations;
- where you have real responsibility, not assuming responsibility where you have none;
- knowing what your limits are and communicating them to others, not assuming people know your limits;
- professional warmth in your interactions with students, not personal enmeshing of self into students' lives;

- respect for your personal life, not thinking about school 24-7.

**Get help when you need it.** Sometimes we can self-help ourselves out of compassion fatigue, and sometimes we need external help. Help can come in the form of advice from a colleague, an appointment with an EAP counsellor through your school district, or seeking a therapist whose approach meets your emotional needs and goals. There is no shame in asking for help – it's often the first step in a fulfilling journey of healing and self-discovery.

**Find your “principles of practice.”** Having enough energy for our own needs isn't selfish; it's an essential part of being able to serve others. Knowing what our own needs are begins with knowing what is important to us. Establishing principles of practice is a tool to deal with compassion fatigue.<sup>[2]</sup> Your principles of practice are the key values that are important to you in life. These create a base to your teaching practice and the lens through which you see and interpret your world. For example, if one of your principles happens to be connection, you can feel good about the students who put effort into learning during the day, rather than dwelling on the one student who is defiant. If your other principle is growth, you can look at this student's defiant behaviour as an opportunity to learn new tools to reach such a student, rather than as a personal failure. If another principle is joy, then thoughts and actions that cultivate joy are what you focus on, rather than spiralling into chronic complaining and irritation after a rough day. Focusing on our principles of practice brings our attention to the values that empower us, not the problems that deflate us.

**Tend your inner space.** Creating a positive inner space is a great way to overcome compassion fatigue. We can cultivate that space through meditation, a hobby, connecting to nature, self-time or socializing. The activity you choose doesn't matter. What matters is creating the time to do an activity you find personally nurturing. Feelings of peace, contentment and joy grow within you through that activity. This refreshes, restores and rejuvenates our spirits.

To care without getting tired is to care with awareness – an awareness of our own responses, expectations and needs. When we teach from the heart of compassion, let's not forget to extend that compassion to ourselves as well. Reframing how we understand compassion so that we can care without burning out transforms our teaching to be even more effective!

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### **Warning Signs of Compassion Fatigue**

- Abusing drugs, alcohol or food
- Irritability and anger
- Blaming
- Chronic lateness
- Depression
- Diminished sense of personal accomplishment
- Exhaustion (physical or emotional)
- Hopelessness
- Tightness in chest
- Inability to maintain balance of empathy and objectivity
- Less ability to feel joy
- Low self-esteem
- Sleep disturbances
- Overwork
- Guilt
- Withdrawal
- Crying jags

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[1] J. H. Zhang, "Of Mothers and Teachers: Roles in a pedagogy of caring," *Journal of Moral Education* 36, no. 4 (2007): 515-526.

[2] J. Pffferling and K. Gilley, "Overcoming compassion fatigue," *Family Practice Management* 7, no. 4

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