Compassion Fatigue
By Karl LaRowe, MA, LCSW

Have you ever heard someone tell a story that made your heart break? Have you ever watched a loved one struggle with an illness? Have you ever worked with a child who was the victim of abuse at home? Have you ever had nightmares or panic attacks because of something violent you saw on T.V.? Have you ever had a friend who lost a son or daughter in an accident?

Caring for other people is part of human nature, but sometimes caring comes at a price. Even if we aren't the victims of direct trauma ourselves, we can experience and internalize it just by talking, working, or living with people who have been victims.

Often times, we feel overcome with powerful, persistent emotions. Heartache. Sadness. Fear. Guilt. Stress. But sometimes these emotions can have physical, even psychological effects — ones that can leave our bodies, minds, and souls burned out and devastated.

If you've ever felt this way about someone else's grief, trauma, or illness, there's a good chance you're suffering from something known as Compassion Fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue is nothing less than secondary post traumatic stress disorder. It's the result of absorbing the emotions of people who have suffered or are suffering from illness, addiction, violence, or other tragedies. Left untreated and unmanaged, it can lead to debilitating symptoms such as dizziness, depression, fatigue, anxiety, and insomnia.

Many Compassion Fatigue sufferers turn to alcohol and drugs as a way of coping, which explains the high rate of alcoholism, drug abuse, and job turnover found among professionals who deal with secondary trauma everyday.

Who Does Compassion Fatigue Affect?

Compassion Fatigue has commonly been diagnosed among health-care and medical workers (doctors, nurses, EMTs, and nursing home attendants). But it's beginning to be diagnosed and recognized among anyone who works closely in a caring capacity with people, such as: social workers, judges, lawyers, psychologists, firemen, police officers, soldiers, child custody workers, teachers, and clergy.

Compassion Fatigue also affects family care providers: those who take care of elderly parents, or disabled/sick children and spouses. The rate of Compassion Fatigue found among adults is only expected to increase as more and more Baby Boomers assume the primary responsibility of caring for their aging parents.

What Can We Do About Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue is caused primarily by the body's inability to release stress. Trauma experienced in the mind literally becomes frozen energy in the body. To release this energy, it has to be converted to flow.

Flow is the state of mind we experience when we're in a groove, full of attention, energy, and concentration. For years, people have used techniques such as Tai Chi, Qigong (Tai Chi's early ancestor), or yoga to create flow in their lives. These techniques also work to release frozen trauma or stress in our bodies and get this trapped energy circulating throughout our bodies in
the form of flow.

Karl LaRowe has combined a few of these ancient techniques into a modern exercise he calls FlowMotion™. Educating people about the benefits of FlowMotion™ in combating Compassion Fatigue forms the central part of his Compassion Fatigue workshops for professionals and non-professionals alike.

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