

Co-Occurring Fatigue: Compassion, Political, and Oppression Fatigue

Understanding and Meeting Our Special Needs as Helping Professionals

By Mary Pender Greene, LCSW-R, CGP
President and CEO
MPG Consulting

For those of us who work in caregiving environments, we are constantly presented with emotional challenges. Compassion Fatigue symptoms result from the chronic stress of care giving work. Leading traumatologist Eric Gentry notes that people who are attracted to caregiving often enter the field already compassion fatigued. They strongly identify with suffering or traumatized individuals, or those in need. They also tend to display other-directed care giving. In other words, they may have been taught at an early age to care for the needs of others before caring for their own needs. In addition, ongoing self-care and self-nurturing practices may be absent from their daily lives. Sound familiar?

What Is Compassion Fatigue?

According to Dr. Charles Figley, Director of the Tulane University Traumatology Institute, Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people 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 helping professional. It has been often described as the “cost of caring” for others in emotional and physical pain (Figley, 1982). Sometimes it is characterized by deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a pronounced change in the service provider’s ability to feel empathy for their patients, their loved ones, and their co-workers.

Compassion Fatigue: Signs and Symptoms

Compassion Fatigue is marked by increased cynicism at work and a loss of enjoyment of one’s career. It can eventually transform into deeper feelings of depression, secondary traumatic stress, and stress-related illnesses. The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brought us all into this work: our empathy and compassion for others.

According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (2017), sufferers can exhibit several symptoms, including hopelessness, decreased pleasure, irritability, constant stress and anxiety, sleeplessness or nightmares, and a pervasive negative attitude. This can have detrimental effects on individuals, both professionally and personally, including a decrease in productivity, the inability to focus, and the development of new feelings of incompetence and self-doubt.

While the symptoms are very often disruptive, depressive, and irritating, an awareness of the symptoms and their negative effects can lead to positive change, transformation, and resiliency. Françoise Mathieu, M.Ed., a leading Compassion Fatigue specialist, notes that everyone has his or her own warning



signs that may indicate Compassion Fatigue. These include:

- Exhaustion
- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- Anger and irritability
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Dread of working with certain clients or patients
- Diminished sense of enjoyment of career
- Disruption to world view, heightened anxiety, or irrational fears
- Intrusive imagery or dissociation
- Hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional material
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Absenteeism – missing work, or taking many sick days
- Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients or patients
- Problems with intimacy and issues in personal relationships

The need for good self-care must not be overlooked. Good self-care and wellness begins with awareness. Heightened awareness encourages insights into past traumas and painful situations that are being relived within the context of symptoms and behaviors. The goal is to heal past traumas that currently serve as obstacles to wellness. A good therapist can be especially helpful. In addition, good self-care will require developing a consistent self-care regiment, including regular exercise, a healthy dieting, social activities, journaling, meditation and restful sleep.

The quality of the helping professionals’ work is closely related to the quality of the supervision that they receive. We can’t be personally falling apart and serve as an example of what good care-giving service is all about. We must take and appreciate down time for reflection and planning. To encourage others, we must take time for ourselves. This includes taking time for lunch and vacations, relaxation, meditation and peer support.

What Is Political Fatigue and Activist Burnout?

In our current unpredictable and fear-provoking social-political climate, we are most susceptible to Political Fatigue,

which occurs when political agendas or policies (i.e., voter suppression, cut backs, anti-immigrant, and anti-LGBTQIA+ initiatives) create a nagging sense of hopelessness when it comes to the efficacy of political action or advocacy. It can lead to anger, anxiety, confusion, frustration and fear of an unsafe world, which can impact our physical, emotional, and psychological health and well-being.

When this extreme fatigue is experienced in the workplace, the organization suffers under many far-reaching symptoms of stress: friction among co-workers, staff-management tension, increased absenteeism, excessive media issues, high turnover and rising workers’ compensation costs. Addressing fatigue within an organization requires stated and demonstrated value of staff, clear directions, good supervision, training, focus on staff relationships and morale, time, patience, understanding and a renewed vision for the future. Losing your vision can further stress and incapacitate staff. We must fortify ourselves and our staff by incorporating “self-care” into our organizational plans – which can motivate employees, energize the entire organization, and effect positive change.

According to Aliya Khan (Everyday Feminism, 2015), Activist Burnout is the feeling of pessimism and physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that comes with advocacy and helping work. Many people become activists because they have passion about social justice issues and how these issues affect the lives of those we serve. In these challenging political times, it’s not unusual that by the time we reach the point of needing a break, we may be suffering from compassion fatigue. Activists who develop both professional and personal self-care and wellness strategies tend to be more resilient, and can shift, grow, and change course.

What Is Oppression Fatigue?

Oppression Fatigue, a term coined by leading counselor, consultant, coach and educator Irene Greene, is the heavy exhaustion that comes from being oppressed – the emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical exhaustion that comes from enduring daily micro and macroaggressions of personal and collective violence, rejection, inequities, discrimination, invisibility and injustices caused by the sys-

tematic privileges of one group(s) over another group(s). As leaders, colleagues and helping professionals it is crucial that we can identify, understand, talk about and learn to address oppression and the intersections of race and racism with gender bias, LGBTQIA+ bias, gender fluidity bias, transmisogyny, class bias, bias against people with disabilities, xenophobia, and religious bias (including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia), plus other forms that bias may take.

We must also understand that the constructs of power, privilege, hierarchical rank and culture are always a part of the individual and institutional context and must be taken into consideration as we address racism and other oppressions. There are things that we can and must do as accountable leaders and colleagues. The first is to speak openly about our struggles with compassion, political, and oppression fatigue. The conspiracy of silence within the profession about any fatigue that affects us as helping professionals is no different than the silence about bullying and sexual harassment in the past.

Also, remember that for helping professionals who are themselves struggling with the impact of Oppression Fatigue (due to daily microaggressions, rejection, inequities, discrimination, invisibility and injustices caused by the systematic privileges), the burden is heavy and exhausting. “If you see something, say something,” as using our privilege can greatly impact the quality of our work environment, our relationships with colleagues, morale and the overall health of our organization. We must engage with each other in a non-shaming, non-blameful, non-judgmental collaborative manner to create safe and brave work spaces. We can then tackle the challenging questions, engage in difficult discussions, and bring everyone’s authentic voice to the table as we address Oppression Fatigue within our workplace and offer our “collective best” to those we serve. Let’s examine how this Fatigue Cluster looks at the organizational level:

Organizational Symptoms of Compassion, Political and Oppression Fatigue

- High absenteeism
- Constant conflict in co-worker relationships
- Inability for teams to work well together
- Desire among staff members to break company rules
- Outbreaks of aggressive behaviors among staff
- Inability of staff to complete assignments and tasks
- Inability of staff to respect and meet deadlines
- Lack of flexibility among staff members
- Negativism towards management
- Strong reluctance toward change
- Inability of staff to believe improvement is possible
- Lack of a vision for the future



MPG Consulting Career & Executive Coaching

Racially & Culturally Attuned Services

Communication • Executive Presentation • Conflict Management • Transitions

MPG Consulting Career & Executive Coaching produces results that are in alignment with organizational goals while addressing the developmental needs of the individual. Our racially and culturally attuned services include confidential and supportive feedback that brings fresh insight and motivates leaders to develop new positive behaviors. We help with the following and so much more:

- **Communication:** Acquire communications skills that allow for seamless transition from a high stakes meeting to a hallway or elevator chat with an associate. We help leaders communicate clearly and efficiently at every level of the organization.
- **Executive Presentation:** Learn methods of projecting self confidence and maintaining poise under stress, and how to cultivate a combination of influential leadership capabilities that inspire trust, enthusiasm and buying in.
- **Conflict Management:** Understand, manage and resolve disputes quickly and effectively. Develop the abilities that build partnership and common purpose to increase employee morale, engagement, efficiency and retention.
- **Transitioning Into New Leadership Roles:** Learn how to rapidly master the skills necessary to succeed in new positions and challenges. Hit the ground running in a new role and learn how to be a valuable asset from day one.

Why MPG Consulting?

MPG career and executive coaches have a wealth of experience performing and coaching at the executive level in multiple organizational structures, combined with a transparent, results-driven approach. **The New York State Education Department recognizes MPG Consulting as an approved provider of continuing education credits for: LCSWs, LMSWs, LCATs, LMHCs, and LMFTs. MPG Consulting is a New York State certified minority and women-owned business enterprise (M/WBE).**

Our Team

The MPG Career & Executive Coaching Consulting Team is composed of experts with extensive experience in executive coaching, team building and leadership development. Our team is committed to the success of each client. We offer tools that support our clients in establishing a collaborative and respectful workplace culture while encouraging diversity and inclusion practices – and demonstrating effective planning, decision-making and relationship-building competencies. We take on the coaching role with the express purpose of crafting dedicated and inspiring leaders. MPG's diverse team has a proven track record of producing measurable outcomes that include personal and organizational growth. **For more information, please contact Lynn Mercredi at lynn@mpgconsultingnyc.com or call 718-252-0712.**

Mary Pender Greene, LCSW-R, CGP, is the President & CEO of MPG Consulting. She is a psychotherapist, career & executive coach, trainer and consultant with a private practice in Midtown Manhattan. She is a thought-leader in the social services industry, recognized by her peers for her novel ideas on coaching, training and mentoring. She has 20+ years of experience helping individuals, couples, companies and non-profit organizations. MPG Consulting provides culturally competent and anti-oppressive (anti-racist, LGBTQ affirming, non-sexist) coaching and professional development to individuals at all levels, and specializes in working with senior management and executive leaders.

