

COMPASSION FATIGUE: TAKING CARE WHEN CARING BECOMES TOO MUCH

BY JENNY TRYANSKY, PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COACH

A friend of mine recently sent me a text that felt like she was waving the white flag. She wrote, "Do you feel burnt out yet? Because I do. I'm dragging myself to the finish line. I've never felt empathetic burnout before now".

She shared that she felt so depleted, she found herself retreating and pursuing 'total escapism' - coping through any activity that didn't force her to face the state of things in the world. She finished with a metaphor that resonated with me: **"You cannot care about others if you are on fire."**

Throughout the pandemic, as we've navigated the stress of the virus and other tensions and traumas - political, financial, systemic, and more - it has often felt like the world is on fire. How can you properly care for your own home as it fills with smoke when the whole neighborhood is engulfed in flames?

Luckily, my friend is well-supported and has done a lot of inner work so her coping tools help her self-preserve and recharge instead of serving as self-destructive actions that could harm her wellbeing. Her tools include limiting news consumption, going to bed early, running, reading, art, creative writing, and 'trying not to beat myself up about every little failure.' She knows what she needs to bring herself back to life and put out her own fire so she can continue caring for and giving to others.

Compassion fatigue is typically associated with people who work in caregiving and helping professions, where exposure to the pain and suffering of others is a regular part of the job. So, it makes sense that nurses, doctors, therapists, counselors, and all frontline workers are now being pushed to extreme limits, and experiencing extreme consequences as a result.

The current circumstances and state of the world are asking and tasking all of us to care and care-give in new and intense ways, in an atmosphere where we're all regularly exposed to pain and suffering. Caregivers of every kind, including parents and those providing care to extended family and community members, are struggling.

Compassion fatigue is the impact of being burnt out from caregiving, and I'd add 'from caring,' period. Impacts can include apathy, hopelessness, numbness, overwhelm, feeling low, retreating and isolating, and a feeling that you have nothing left to give. It can be experienced physically, mentally, and spiritually.

SO, WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THIS?

[Compassionfatigue.org](http://compassionfatigue.org/) (<http://compassionfatigue.org/>) suggests that "Providing authentic, sustainable self-care daily can help manage and lessen the disruptive issues associated with compassion fatigue."

Sounds easy enough in theory. In practice though, most of us, especially helpers and empaths, aren't very good at making space for self-care, and many don't even know how to define it for themselves.

Another complication is that most of us have been taught that it's nobler to take care of others before taking care of ourselves and this notion keeps getting in the way of our own self-care.

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Adopting a self-ish approach to self-care means recognizing that we don't choose ourselves over others when we focus on our self-care. Instead, we honor both. Do you know that oxygen mask that falls from the ceiling of the airplane when trouble hits? You're told to put on your mask before assisting others. Why? Because if your oxygen is cut off, there's no way you're going to be able to save anyone else.

Caring for ourselves doesn't mean disregarding the needs of others. It means refueling our tank so we don't show up empty for others. Self-care is as much about the ones we love, support and care for as it is about ourselves.

Let that sink in and write it down somewhere where you can't escape or hide from it. Let it be your permission slip, or even better, your prescription as a caregiver right now. Self-care is an essential service for all caregivers and helpers, and it needs to be protected and re-prioritized on our to-do lists.

AUTHENTIC, SUSTAINABLE SELF-CARE

A question I hear often is "how do I make time and space for self-care when I barely have time for anything right now?"

The other thing that's become tragically clear is that many people don't know what self-care looks like for them. If you can't grasp what it means for you, how are you going to make it a priority?

The authentic part of 'authentic, sustainable self-care' means looking inward and asking yourself what you really need to refuel, instead of looking to emulate other people's versions of self-care. No one knows what you need better than you do, and no one knows what's realistic for you (ie: sustainable!) better than you.

Asking yourself "what do I really need right now?" is different than asking what you want. You may want to reach for an unhealthy, unhelpful coping tool when what you really need is to rest. You may want to sit in front of the TV for hours on end when what you really need is to move your body to release tension. **True self-care is taking care of your true needs.**

For me, regular self-care includes acupuncture, yoga-Nidra, sleep, meditation, and moving my body - usually by walking outside in fresh air, but even dancing out my tense energy with my daughter or on my own will suffice.

When I experience compassion fatigue, I know I need to get quiet and make my world a little smaller for a while. It doesn't mean shutting people out; it requires me to give my needs a voice, and let the people in my circle know where I'm at. I may temporarily not be as responsive or talkative, but I allow myself to take that space for as long as I need to replenish my energy.

The excuse "I don't have time" may feel like a hard fact to you. But if you really question yourself, you may see how this idea is sabotaging your ability to care for yourself. When we re-frame self-care as a crucial piece of caring for others, it usually opens a doorway.

If you're still stuck, try giving self-care a new name. Block off time in your calendar for whatever your version of self-care is, and give it a name that will remind you of what it's really about, for example: "replenishment hour" or "refueling my tank for others." Make it meaningful with a label that recognizes that your care is also about those you care for. Giving these things a name I can get behind helps protect them with non-negotiable boundaries.

BECOMING SELF-COMPASSIONATE CAREGIVERS

Early in the pandemic, I watched a virtual talk with author and speaker Elizabeth Gilbert, where she described the difference between empathy and compassion like this:

- Empathy = if I feel your pain, I can't help you with your pain because now I'm in pain and I can't be a helper.
- Compassion = holding space for someone's pain without taking it on yourself.

She cautioned: "In these times when there is more need than we have resources for, replace empathy with compassion."

Empathy is sitting in the pit of struggle with the person who's struggling. Compassion is holding the person as they sit in that pit, supporting them and caring for them but not suffering in the depths of it yourself.

It's important to ask ourselves where we're at and recognize when empathy is causing us to suffer. If you find yourself taking on the pain of others, try using that visual of doing what you need to do (self-care) to get out of the pit, and hold space for them instead.

Self-compassion is how you hold space for yourself. Building on that visual, you can hold space for *YOU* while at the same time holding it for others.

When you're compassionate towards yourself, you validate your own experience and recognize its impact on you.

What's true for you might include feeling overwhelmed, resentful, and even burdened by the things you're shouldering. Judging ourselves for those hard truths creates even more distress. So, a really key piece of self-compassion right now is validating our hard truths without judging or silver-lining them.

Learn I hear a lot of silver lining from clients these days. At least I'm not sick; other people have it way worse; I'm lucky I'm still employed even though I'm struggling to care for my family," etc. Remember: **Ask** **Expert Blog** **COVID-19**
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- Our blessings don't negate our true experiences of what's hard right now. We can validate our struggles and still be grateful for the good in our lives. One doesn't erase the other.
- Acknowledging that our challenges are hard without striving to solve them or judge ourselves for having them is an act of self-compassion.
- Be a self-compassionate caregiver by asking yourself what you need to hear in moments of struggle and offering yourself those words, speaking to yourself with the same loving-kindness as you would with a friend.

RESPONSIBILITY & ASKING HARD QUESTIONS

Carrying the weight of the world as well as our own responsibilities can lead us to a skewed view of what is actually ours to shoulder. Some key questions to ask yourself are: What am I actually responsible for?

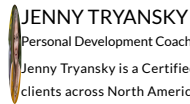
How might you be inflating your sense of responsibility and adding weight or extra to-dos to the pile?

What's not mine to bear?

Be honest with yourself and ask what weights can be reasonably be lifted, shared, or passed along to someone else, even for a short time. When you're burnt out, extras need to go. That freed-up energy can go into self-care.

Consider where you're turning to re-fuel by asking, "Is this self-care, self-preservation, and/or replenishment, or is this self-destructive coping?" Sometimes we can't tell the difference until we ask ourselves some hard questions.

Finally, if your coping is destructive if the weight is truly unbearable and you're struggling to replenish and self-preserve, please reach out for help. Therapy, counseling, support networks are also part of essential self-care if and when we need those resources.



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Jenny Tryansky is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach based in Toronto, Canada. She works virtually with clients across North America with a whole life/whole person approach. Jenny specializes in working with high achievers who have loud inner critics. She brings mindful self-compassion practices into her coaching work, helping people find the confidence, clarity, and self-acceptance needed to reach their goals and aspirations. Her signature workshop "Working with Your Inner Critic to Live, Work and Lead with Confidence" supports employees and individuals who experience imposter syndrome and feelings of being lesser than and has been well received in high-impact environments such as Google Canada. For more information visit her [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/jennytryanskycoaching/) (<https://www.facebook.com/jennytryanskycoaching/>), [LinkedIn profile](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennytryansky/) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennytryansky/>), or www.jennytryansky.ca (<https://www.jennytryansky.ca/>).

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