

Compassion Fatigue and Caregiver Self-care

Caregiving Rewards and Challenges

Caring for children and youth who are in the child welfare system can be a tough experience. You're providing a stable home for children who have endured difficult experiences, grief and loss and likely have misplaced coping mechanisms that can be challenging to deal with as a caregiver or foster parent. You want to be there for them but at times you may feel exhausted – not only dealing with their behaviors and responses but also with the uncertainty and bureaucracy of the foster care system.

How Does Trauma Play into Compassion Fatigue?

Children who have been in the child welfare system are initially placed to keep them safe. As victims of trauma, they have survived extreme circumstances. Meeting their complex needs and hearing their stories of survival can take an emotional toll and cause secondary traumatic stress — the emotional upset that a person experiences when exposed to the trauma experiences of another person. Another name for this is compassion fatigue.

Here are some symptoms of compassion fatigue to look out for:

- Nightmares
- Insomnia
- Failing memory
- Hopelessness
- A lack of focus
- Irritability
- Shame
- Weight loss or gain
- Desire to isolate

It's important to make sure that compassion fatigue doesn't turn into burnout, the emotional, physical and mental exhaustion that prevents you from being able to properly care for your children. As someone who cares deeply about your foster children, it can be easy to take everything to heart. But you must balance your needs with the needs of the children.

Looking at Yourself and Your Children Through a Trauma Lens

When looking at your foster care experience through a trauma lens, you start to see that not only do your children have a trauma history, but maybe you do, too. Compassion fatigue can involve being reminded of your own unresolved trauma, which can feel overwhelming. But remember that you and your children are doing the best you can and you're learning how to do even better.

One solution for compassion fatigue is learning [trauma-informed parenting](#). This method of parenting can help you to be a better parent and help your children build resilience – the ability to bounce back after adversity.

What You Can Do

Here are four quick self-care tips that you can use to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout.

1. **Look into respite care.** Explore with your caseworker possible respite resources. Planned visits with another caregiver can give you and your foster child a needed break. All respite care arrangements need to include a caregiver that is a good fit for your foster child.
2. **Start doing the activities you enjoy.** Listening to music, going to the movies, exercising, going for a walk, gardening – find time every day to do whatever brings you joy and is healthy and safe.
3. **Make sure you have someone to talk to.** It can be stressful to see how your children are coping and you may take that pain on yourself. Your caseworker can be an ally, but also consider going to a therapist or a support group.
4. **Keep a “Q-TIP.”** Q-TIP is an acronym meaning “quit taking it personally” and can be an easy way to remind yourself that when your children act out or are going through a trying time (for example, with a biological parent visit). You can be there for them without taking on all their emotions.

Resources

Compassion Resilience Toolkit – Facilitator resources to build the capacity of helping professionals, caregivers, and the systems in which they serve. Retrieved from <https://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org/>

How to Manage Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving | Patricia Smith | TEDxSanJuanIsland. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7keppA8XRas>

Self-Care for Foster Parents Training Video. Retrieved from <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/selfcare/start.html>

Trauma-informed Parenting: What You Should Know. Retrieved from <http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv18n1/know.htm>

Understanding Difficult Behavior: For Foster and Adoptive Parents. (2010, April 15). Retrieved from GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog website: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/therapy-adoption-child-behavior/>