



COMBATING COMPASSION FATIGUE - THE JEWISH ANSWER TO “WHAT’S NEXT?”

Jewish life tends to move in cycles. Our calendar rotates according to the lunar cycle. Even our humor can contain cycles; when we joke about holidays, we repeat “they tried to kill us, we survived, so let’s eat!”

This historical repetition comes up during the discussions of most Jewish holidays. We spend hours studying and honoring a time when our people experienced some kind of hardship or crisis we worked to overcome so we could keep going as a people. Resilience in the face of suffering is one of the strongest values we have as a culture; no matter what we experience, we find a way to continue on, to celebrate life for our future generations. The holiday of Tisha B’Av is a day to spend reflecting on the many times our people have suffered throughout history, such as the destruction of the First and Second Temple, the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust.

Closely following that holiday, we observe Tu B’Av – the day we traditionally celebrate love, marriage and the continuation of life. This pairing of suffering with recovery and resilience is crucial to the survival of the Jewish people, and this cycle can teach us much about how we can cope and persevere in our own lives today.

Crisis is unfortunately a regular part of life for many people, especially those who directly experience something like an illness, injury or environmental disruption. These events affect not only the person suffering but also the loved ones and professionals who provide care and support for them for the duration of the event. In an ideal world, those supporting individuals, such as parents and caregivers, would be able to meet the needs of the ones they are responsible for as well as their own and be able to move on with little consequence to whatever comes next. Often, however, caregivers lack the physical, environmental and mental resources to cope with the stress of being with and caring for someone in crisis. That’s when compassion fatigue can develop.





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“The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brings helpers into this work: their empathy and compassion for others.” (Figley Institute 2012)

The term “**compassion fatigue**” was first used in 1992 to describe a mental health phenomenon experienced by nurses and other healthcare providers in emergency rooms and intensive care units. Supervisors had started to notice these providers were suffering from negative physical and mental health consequences as a result of being constantly exposed to emergencies.

Compassion fatigue has two main components*:

- **Burnout** – The emotional and physical fatigue experienced by professionals due to their chronic use of empathy in helping others in distress.
- **Secondary traumatic stress** – An individual does not have to experience a traumatic event personally to be affected by it. Individuals may feel like the trauma of the people they are supporting is happening to them.

Constant high levels of physical and emotional stress can desensitize caregivers to others' needs, causing them to develop a lack of empathy for future caregiving work. First identified in the healthcare setting, compassion fatigue can hit anyone who is caring for and strongly affected by someone in crisis.





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We need to distinguish the burnout that comes with compassion fatigue from long-term – or environmental – burnout. The two types have some symptoms in common, but compassion fatigue and long-term burnout differ in the onset, severity and duration. Compassion fatigue tends to appear more quickly, is generally less severe and resolves itself faster. Long-term burnout affects one’s functioning and is a response to the inability to cope with environmental stress – not necessarily a traumatic or crisis event.

Some refer to compassion fatigue as “vicarious traumatization,” and while more severe forms can develop into full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the majority do not. It can occur as a result of a single event, e.g., a family member’s severe illness, or ongoing stressful events, such as those a first responder may experience. (Figley, 1995)

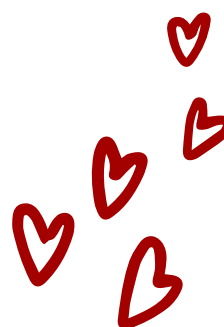
The very strengths and traits that attract people to caregiving and make them great at it are blunted or lost completely with the development of compassion fatigue. People tend to experience the following:



Helplessness, being extremely tired and feeling overwhelmed.



Frustration, cynicism, or anger and irritability.



Physical effects, such as shortness of breath, increased headaches, heart palpitations, trouble falling asleep or muscle tension.



Disorientation or confusion, memory disturbance.*



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It can be very easy to become overwhelmed or even debilitated by the above symptoms, and many people do. Compassion fatigue has pushed many good caregivers away, and turnover in these types of professions is high.

Some of us experience this in our own small way when we learn about the difficult history of the Jewish people. This is especially true when it comes to Tisha B’Av (the ninth day of the month of Av), which commemorates the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem. Considered a day of mourning, traditional rituals include fasting and somber (as opposed to joyful) study of the Torah. While lamenting the two tragedies and chanting kinot (elegies) about the suffering and pain of the Jewish people through the ages, one can become easily overwhelmed with the amount of hardship Jews continue to endure even today, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness can become dominant.



As often happens, the Jewish calendar provides us with the necessary balance to combat all the sadness and negative energy. Tu B’Av reminds us we can and should also be putting our feelings of caring and kindness into places that will sustain us and bring us into the future.

Experts say self-care and appropriate boundaries offer the best way to combat and prevent compassion fatigue.

The practices commonly observed on Tu B’Av can help us to re-center ourselves spiritually and emotionally. We are encouraged to express joy and gratitude for loved ones in our lives – by verbal expressions of love, flowers, small gifts, etc. These small gestures of positivity can go a long way in helping families and communities persevere when things are difficult.



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Accepting the presence of compassion fatigue in our lives shows we are deeply caring individuals. If we want to continue to be there for others, we must first and always care for ourselves and find sources of positivity, gratitude and motivation to continue doing the challenging work of caregiving.

Compassion satisfaction is the sense of fulfillment and other positive feelings caregivers have about the work they do, based on feelings of hope, strength and resilience.

Strategies for combating fatigue and increasing satisfaction include:

- Finding a regular source of support in peers, supervisors, friends and family.
- Educating yourself about the signs and symptoms of fatigue and burnout, and addressing them early.
- Taking frequent breaks, identifying respite caregivers to be there so you can walk away.
- Avoiding the temptation to isolate by continuing to root yourself in the outside community as a way of staying connected and maintaining perspective.

