Compassion Fatigue
What it is and what you can do about it

Lori Weichenthal, MD
Department of Emergency Medicine
UCSF-Fresno
“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

Dr. Naomi Rachel Remen
Introduction

• Definitions
• Self Assessments
• Warning Signs
• Restocking your Emotional Bank Account
• Exercises
• References and Resources
Self-Care is a priority and necessity - not a luxury - in the work that we do.
Empathy
Compassion
Compassion Fatigue

- Different from burnout
- “The cost of caring”
- Also called secondary traumatic stress
- An occupation hazard
- Occurs on a continuum
- Exhaustion in three realms
- Can cause symptoms of PTSD
Compassion Fatigue Model

Exposure to Suffering → Empathic Ability → Empathic Response → Residual Compassion Stress → Compassion Fatigue

Detachment → Concern → Sense of Satisfaction → Prolonged Exposure to Trauma → Other Life Demands → Traumatic Memories

The compassion fatigue process (Figley, 2001)
It is O.K. to take care of yourself too.
Self Assessment for being an Empath

- Have I been labeled as “too emotional” or overly sensitive?
- If a friend is distraught, do I start feeling it too?
- Are my feelings easily hurt?
- Am I emotionally drained by crowds, require time alone to revive?
- Do my nerves get frayed by noise, smells, or excessive talk?
- Do I prefer taking my own car places so that I can leave when I please?
- Do I overeat to cope with emotional stress?
- Am I afraid of becoming engulfed by intimate relationships?
If you answer “yes” to 1-3 of these questions, you’re at least part empath. Responding “yes” to more than 3 indicates that you are an empath.
Empathy Scale

Sociopath → Empath
SELF ASSESSMENT FOR COMPASSION FATIGUE
Self Assessment

If you responded with a 1 to more than 15 of the items, you are at high risk for compassion fatigue.
Signs and Symptoms

- Exhaustion
- Increased cynicism
- Anger and irritability
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- Dread of work
- Diminished enjoyment of career
- Heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- Intrusive imagery or dissociation
Signs and Symptoms

- Difficulty separating work from home life
- Absenteeism
- Impaired ability to make decisions and care for patients
- Problems with intimacy in personal relationships
Restocking Your Emotional Bank Account

• Practice self care
• Monitor your self
• Identify stress relief strategies
• Facilitated physician discussion groups**
• Mindfulness-based practices**
• Seek professional help
Exercises
Resources

• Institute for the Study of Health and Illness (http://ishiprograms.org/)
• Compassion Fatigue Solutions (http://compassionfatigue.ca)
• Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (www.compassionfatigue.org)
• Happy MD (http://www.thehappymd.com)
References