



*Faith  
Winters*

# THE HELPERS JOURNEY, COMPASSION FATIGUE



## Faith Makes a Difference

Faith has spent all of her life observing people, reading, studying and learning about the world around her: what works and what doesn't work. Her focus is always on how she can help people's lives be better.

As an experienced coach, mentor, consultant, counselor, author, and teacher, Faith has worked to develop and equip other people who help people so they can be more influential in the work they do. She guides them to be more effective in their job, to have more confidence, to communicate well, and to have better relationships with the people they serve, their co-workers and their own families.

**Caring for others in need is hard work.** Faith provides guidance to helping professionals so they can figure out how to do this vital and fulfilling work long term, avoiding compassion fatigue. She equips people with knowledge on how to stay energized, focused and have enduring enthusiasm for the work that they do. Faith is able to conceptualize the strengths people have and make a plan for how they can use those strengths to be more effective in the work that they do, coaching them on how they can have a thriving ministry and a thriving family life.



**Faith provides Life Coaching for helping professionals** on how to focus their work to better fit their passions and strengths, how to increase their influence and effectiveness and also helping them explore their risk of compassion fatigue and how to manage the risk and strategies for prevention for individuals, leaders and organizations



How can Faith help you?

503 267 3149

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**This is an excerpt from Faith's upcoming book**

The Helper's Journey: Compassion Fatigue

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## **Chapter 3 - Compassion Fatigue**

The key principles to recognizing, managing, healing and most importantly – preventing – compassion fatigue.

## The Problem

Those who help others usually start out passionate about their ability to make a difference in the world, to help people live better lives. One reason people go into helping professions is a genuine caring heart for the needs of others and wanting to help. You can help others and still thrive in your own life. If you feel drained and tired, it is possible to rekindle your passion and joy in the work you have chosen to do.

Throughout this book, we will explore what you need to know about compassion fatigue: What it is, who is at risk, how to avoid it, how to manage it, and how to heal from it. In this section, we will quickly overview compassion fatigue. Later sections will look closely at how it affects individuals, those in leadership, and the organizations in which helpers work. There are prevention strategies that can be put in place in each of those venues that will lower the risk, increase effectiveness, and help people manage and heal from the debilitating effects of compassion fatigue.

Caring for others is hard work and draining. So, why would anyone choose to do this work? There is such a sense of fulfillment and joy in seeing some of the people we serve get better and start to thrive! We get a front-row seat in watching God at work in their lives and he even lets us help. That is a glorious privilege!

Helpers are the often-unsung heroes of a society. They choose to work in difficult situations with people who are experiencing some of life's toughest issues. Sometimes these are the people who seem less valued or understood by people in the mainstream of our society, like those who may be chronically ill, physically or mentally, or those at the edges of society who are poor, downtrodden, abused, and without stable housing. The work environment where they do this caring is often stressful and can be filled with negative emotions from those in charge, their co-workers, and the people they serve. The people they serve may be experiencing chronic crisis and they may have fewer skills in handling their intense emotions.

The very traits that make helpers good at their jobs, the very reasons they choose to do this work, are also the very risk factors for compassion fatigue. Helpers often have a depth of compassion and empathy for people who are suffering; they want to help. Those with the most empathy are often most at risk of compassion fatigue.

## What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is a phrase we use to describe a set of symptoms including the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of being a caring person who helps others during difficult life circumstances of stress or trauma.

## The Effects of Compassion Fatigue

People in helping professions minister in chaos—on a good day, the chaos is still ankle deep. Other days it can rise above their knees and the current of it can sweep them off their feet. They can struggle to keep their own footing, feeling as if they are in danger of drowning in the very chaos of those they are seeking to help. This is also known as a secondary stress reaction. When the helper's stress builds to a higher and higher level, the helper may find they are in danger of developing compassion fatigue.

The work that helpers have chosen to do because they care about others is the very job or life circumstances that put them at risk for compassion fatigue. The empathy they have for those in pain is what makes them effective. Yet when they are constantly exposed to the unremitting suffering of those they serve, the helper's stress level begins to build. Eventually, people can care for others at the expense of their own health needs.

When a helper is experiencing compassion fatigue, their ability to show empathy and compassion to those they serve can erode. They are around so much suffering that they numb themselves out of self-defense in order to survive and still do the helping tasks. But the coping skill of numbing also hinders their ability to care for themselves and connect with family and friends.



## The Promise

There are things you can do to lower your risk of compassion fatigue or to manage it or to heal from it. You chose to do this helping work because you care about people, but your energy seems to be eroding more and more each day. We will explore many different strategies that you can use individually, with those you manage, and in your organization that will increase effectiveness and make life better for yourself and those you serve. If you put into practice a few of these strategies, your stress level will decrease, the workplace will become more effective, and there will be more harmony in your life. If you put all the strategies into action, you will transform your helping work and influence the people around you, making life better for everyone!

Where do you start to keep your compassion and energy for the work you have chosen to do? The most important first step is to know the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue.

## Knowing the Components of Compassion Fatigue

### Risk Factors

Objectively look at your situation. What risk factors are you experiencing?

- Is it the daily tasks you have for the people you help?
- Is it the types of situations the people you help are in?
- Is the volume of work you do more than can be done in time allotted?
- Are you working with a challenging supervisor or co-workers?
- Do you feel equipped for the skill level or complexity of work?

Practicing healthy work habits and healthy self-care go a long way toward preventing compassion fatigue, but sometimes stress and trauma in personal and work life can overwhelm the best of self-care routines. Things can seem to pile on all at once. Compassion fatigue is not something anyone chooses to experience; however, it is a common response to long-term, chronic stressors. It is the responsibility of helping professionals to recognize it, deal with it, manage it, and work toward healing from it. It is also their responsibility to implement prevention strategies to lower the risks.

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Before you can manage compassion fatigue, though, you need to know some of its common symptoms.

## Twelve Common Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue:

1. Your physical and mental health are negatively affected
2. Chronic exhaustion (emotional, physical, or both)
3. Reduced feelings of sympathy or empathy, a sense of being detached
4. Feelings of irritability, anger, or anxiety
5. Impaired decision-making, judgment, and behavior
6. Diminished sense of career satisfaction
7. A loss of hope, feeling helpless or powerless
8. Your effectiveness at your work goes down, mistakes increase
9. You find yourself unable to stop thinking about the problems of those you care for
10. You have disturbances in your sleep pattern
11. You feel less connected spiritually, have a more negative worldview
12. You don't feel like doing anything—having decreased pleasure in activities



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The sooner you recognize the signs in yourself or others, the sooner interventions can be put in place to manage compassion fatigue, heal from it, and use preventive strategies to lower the risk of it flaring up again.

When compassion fatigue in those who provide therapeutic services is not recognized and treated, it affects work performance, home life, and mental and physical health, and may lead to lowered effectiveness and judgment—which can have ethical and legal implications.

It is vital for you to get help when you need it. If you neglect recognizing and treating it the quality of care you provide for those you help can erode; your family life and the lives of those you love the most can suffer.

People who help others can often sacrifice their own self-care time as they focus more on the needs of others. Their own pleasure in activities they enjoy diminishes when they get tired and feel the stress of work weighing them down. It becomes hard to even want to do these things. And yet the break from the stress of caring for others is exactly what they need in order to recharge their own strength. When helpers take even a little bit of time to tend to their own needs to recharge, it makes life better for everyone. They have more strength and energy; their family life is better, and they are more effective and compassionate in their work. Self-care is not expendable—it is essential

When helpers are exposed to the constant and unremitting needs of those who are traumatized, they themselves can begin to feel overwhelmed. They may notice that they are less empathetic, feeling depressed, having lowered hopes for good outcomes, they may have trouble sleeping, they may drift into isolation or anxiety, they may withdraw from those they love, they may find themselves more irritable and angrier. These are all signs of a depleted state and a warning to rebalance life. This good time to consider contacting a professional therapist to help process your feelings and your own emotional wounds. Another helper you could contact is a professional life coach who can help you devise strategies to be more effective and lower your risk for compassion fatigue, as well as help you to thrive at work and at home. That means a better life for you, your colleagues, and those you serve.



## Effective Strategies for Dealing with the Risks of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue develops slowly over time and it will take some time to heal from it. While taking time off for rest and relaxation can go a long way toward healing, if helpers just step back in to the same patterns when return to caring for others, compassion fatigue will continue to show up. Beyond the time of rest, helpers need to make preventive changes to lower the risk of its continual recurrence.

### Individual Strategies

The effective helper has to figure out how to remain compassionate and supportive, retaining their empathy while keeping their own emotional boundaries and not being overwhelmed and taking on the pain of those they are helping. It is important to increase your awareness of yourself and how you are reacting to the stresses of your work. First, we will look at strategies you as a helper can put into place in your own life: the key skills to prevent, manage, and recover from compassion fatigue:

- Eat a balanced, nutritious diet
- Get regular exercise
- Set a routine schedule of restful sleep
- Take the time to find a schedule so you can balance your personal and work life
- Use positive self-care and coping strategies
- Cultivate healthy friendships outside of your field of work
- Cultivate healthy friendships inside of your field of work
- Be aware of and honor your own emotional needs
- Practice recognizing the good in each day
- Get professional help, therapy, and/or coaching when needed

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Taking daily time for yourself can be moments scattered throughout the day: Listen to a calming meditation on your breaks. Take a flight of stairs instead of the elevator at times to get a quiet few moments and some helpful exercise.

Have a decompression routine at the end of the day. Walking out to the car after work, think through and set down the remnants of your day. Then listen to restful music or an interesting audio book on the commute home. When you are home, be fully home, be with those you are with.

Your support network is a vital component of being able to help others. You need to be able to debrief your stresses with a safe peer inside your work and with a safe friend outside of your work. Taking care of others is hard work and a heavy load to carry. When you have someone who will listen, it helps you to set the load down.

## Strategies for Leaders

Those who are responsible for leading the helpers not only need to look to their own risk of compassion fatigue they also need to think how to support those who work with them.

- Important topics like compassion fatigue can be introduced by leaders at staff trainings as a common occupational hazard that happens even to those who do their job well
- Be open to discussions centered around how to recognize the signs of compassion fatigue, how to manage in the workplace and at home, and most importantly how to use prevention strategies to lower the risk
- Support and encourage your helping professionals and volunteers in learning new skills and refreshing current skills
- Let the people you lead know that you see them and the hard work that they do; show appreciation and offer words of affirmation for the skill you see in use

It is important to understand that in the helping professions there is always more to do than can ever be done; the needs always exceed our ability to meet them all. It is the nature of the work we chose to do. So accept this truth and adapt to it. You cannot do everything. But you can do something and that something is valuable. Do what is in front of you to do.

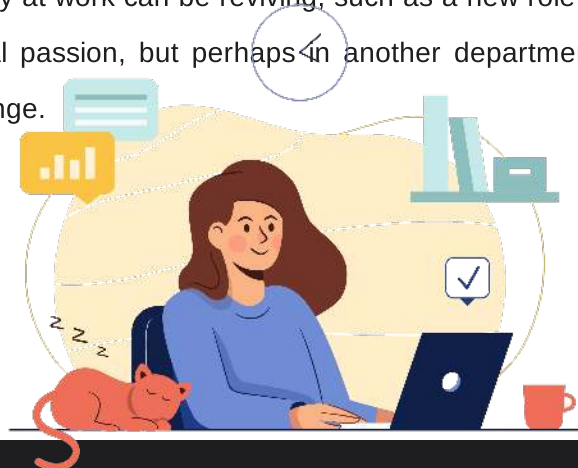
## Workplace Strategies

Next we will look at ways a workplace or an organization can support individuals with risk of developing compassion fatigue, as well as how to have a healthy workplace, showing support and valuing volunteers and staff.

- Provide access to someone who is supportive and flexible, who will listen and be open to changes that will lower workplace stress and therefore increase effectiveness
- Provide ongoing training and professional education that is supported and modeled by the manager
- Allow more personal control over their own schedule and some of the process decisions for the work they do
- Balance the time spent in the more stressful parts of the work with time spent on the more pleasant parts of the work
- Have a risk management plan for compassion fatigue in your workplace
- Offer access to confidential mental health counseling
- Get help for the leaders in your organization; offer expert coaching and lists of resources

Do things to make your workplace more pleasant for yourself and others. Even small things can make a big difference. The way you greet people, the things you are grateful for, and noticing and valuing the work of others can go a long way toward making a work environment more supportive and nourishing for yourself and those around you. When people feel unvalued or taken advantage of, it leads to less satisfaction and disgruntled attitudes that can make a workplace feel toxic. Fostering positive attitudes and camaraderie among the ones you work with and serve can help improve your overall feelings toward the work you do.

Sometimes a change of scenery at work can be reviving, such as a new role or a new position. You can still help people and follow your original passion, but perhaps in another department, at another organization, or with people facing a different challenge.



## Stages of a Helper's Journey

Throughout this chapter we have taken a quick look at compassion fatigue, who is at risk and why, how to recognize the signs it is developing, and what you can do about it personally, within organizations, and as a leader of other helpers. There are other considerations to consider as part of a helper's journey.

**When people choose to become helpers they may go through a number of stages. Often the first two are:**

- Passionate compassion, joyful, enthusiasm, idealism
- Reality sets in, objective view of what this work is



## Then the helper's path may go one of these ways:

### 1. Healthy path forward

- Adjustment to the work-life balance
- Planning and implementing self-care strategies

As a result, the helper is able to thrive in helping work and do it long-term. Their relationships thrive and they are supported in their caring work by their loved ones.

### 2. Over-investment

- Becoming enmeshed in the work of helping
- Caring for others at the expense of their own needs

As a result, their judgment can become impaired, compassion erodes, they withdraw, and become dissatisfied. There is a risk of damage to relationships with those they serve and their own loved ones.

### 3. Creating extra stress

- Trying to control everything, showing a lack of flexibility
- Impaired judgment may lead to unethical, harmful choices

As a result, they may become rigid in the way they interact with others, refuse input, and continue in old patterns rather than adapting to new circumstances.

### 4. Escape

- The helpers run from all forms of helping
- Their worldview is shaped by the pain they have seen and felt

As a result, people either find another path in life that is a better fit, or they live in regret that they feel like they were not strong enough to do the work they wanted to do.

At any point, helpers can recognize where they are in these paths and choose to take a different path. The healthy path forward—re-investing in their original passion with a more mature, sustainable focus—is always one of the options. In the rest of this book, we will explore this in more detail and what it means to a you as a helper, to those who lead other helpers and to organizations that helpers serve in. *The Helper's Journey: Compassion Fatigue*

# What do you need?

Do you want to be more influential in the work you do? Do you want to be more effective in your job, to communicate with confidence and to have better relationships with the people you serve, your co-workers and your own loved ones?

Faith provides Life Coaching to helping professionals so they can figure out how to do this vital and fulfilling work long term, avoiding compassion fatigue. She equips people with knowledge on how to stay energized, focused and have enduring enthusiasm for the work that they do. Faith is able to conceptualize the strengths people have and make a plan for how they can use those strengths to be more effective in the work that they do, coaching them on how they can have a thriving ministry and a thriving family life.

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