

Physicians Health Program Message

## Avoid Compassion Fatigue

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**W**e've talked many times in this column about physician burnout; today I want to address a specific form of burnout: compassion fatigue. There's been a lot of interest and a lot written about this since 9/11, when it became an obvious problem among healthcare professionals and therapists working with victims of that horrible disaster. It is not unique to physicians but is common and, I think, one of the more common forms of physician burnout today.

One definition of compassion fatigue (CF) is when a physician gets to the point where they are drained of empathy. Usually they are the last to know; their family, partners, even patients will realize it before the doctor does. It's evidenced by physical, mental and spiritual fatigue – it involves all aspects of a physician's being.

The causes are the usual suspects. Doctors are so busy these days; where they used to see 25 patients a day, they're now seeing 40 and 50. Physicians are required to do a lot more paperwork in dealing with third parties and accessing care for their patients; they're required to negotiate more contracts and overall have a lot less autonomy and control than they did just a few years ago. Another big cause is a personality trait that many, if not most, physicians share, and that is perfectionism. It's one of those qualities that helps us get in and through medical school, survive years of rigorous training, and makes us good physicians in many ways, but self-imposed pressure for perfection is a cause for CF later on in our careers.

### WARNING SIGNS

There are some predictors that can clue us in to whether a doctor is at risk or suffering from CF. They probably do not have any kind of a life outside of medicine. There is

usually a lot of patient turnover or patient dissatisfaction; in general, a physician suffering from CF is a malpractice case waiting to happen. They become dissociated – they may still be practicing good clinical medicine, but they see more of the physical clinical aspects of what's going on rather than having empathy for what the patient is feeling. There's no question many physicians are having difficulties in the workplace and are being labeled as disruptive; in a lot of cases, they're really suffering from compassion fatigue and the anger they show is a warning sign of this fatigue.

Unfortunately, some begin to self-medicate with alcohol and other drugs, which gets them started down a slippery slope: they start blaming others, they're chronically late for their scheduled appointments. Once they get into that cycle of CF, no matter what they're doing or how successful they are, they have a feeling of diminished personal accomplishment. They feel exhausted, physically and emotionally, no matter how much rest they get. They have a lot of somatic complaints, such as headaches, and eventually develop hopelessness – all this is a manifestation of major depression.

### WHAT TO DO?

Physicians at risk or suffering from CF must find someone to talk to, some kind of support group, among friends, colleagues, their spiritual community, etc. Most of all, doctors need to understand a lot of this pain is normal and a reflection of what goes on in

practicing medicine today. They should start practicing what they preach to their patients, such as exercising, eating properly, getting enough sleep, and taking time off from medicine not just to rest but to stand back and gain perspective on their life.

Some of the don'ts with CF: don't start blaming others for the way you feel; don't think the solution is to get a new job, a new car, an affair or a divorce; don't fall into the habit of complaining; don't hire a lawyer – a lot of physicians in the throes of burnout start suing their partners or the hospital and that is not a solution; don't work harder or longer; don't self-medicate; and don't neglect your own needs or interests – take care of yourself.

We've known about CF for years. We know the problems it causes, emotionally, physically and spiritually – doctors lose their joy of practicing medicine, they can become hopeless or depressed, and they need to understand this is very common today and one of the most common forms of burnout in physicians.

There is a solution and I'd like to encourage you, if you are suffering from CF or know someone who is, to contact the TMF. We have resources, including "Health for the Healer" workshops, and a lot of caring professionals just a phone call away. ■

*To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physicians Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.*

