

Teaching on EMPTY

As more students suffer from trauma, compassion fatigue is becoming a problem for teachers and administrators alike

By Kenneth W. Elliott, Judith K. Elliott, and Stephanie G. Spears

As increasing numbers of traumatized students enter classrooms, schools are asked to do more by incorporating trauma-informed instruction modalities. And while it's appropriate to focus on traumatized learners' needs, districts might be overlooking the impact that compassion fatigue has on teachers and administrators and its contribution to teacher attrition.

Defining Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a relatively new concept. It was originally identified by Charles Figley in the late '90s following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. After repeated exposure to traumatized people, Oklahoma City's first responders started to experience subtle, yet significant, negative impacts on job performance.

Since this tragedy, public awareness of compassion fatigue has increased, and it has come to be identified with professions other than first responders. Most professionals who encounter traumatized individuals are at risk of

developing compassion fatigue, and it is a growing concern within school settings.

Teachers are often the first line of engagement. "[When] writing in journals, students often share personal information that normally would not be shared," one said. But teachers often do not benefit from the advanced trauma and crisis intervention training school counselors typically have.

The Scope of the Problem

In our urban school district, we suspected that the impact of compassion fatigue on teachers, principals, and district administrators was substantial, and during trainings, the size and scope of the problem became apparent.

Anonymous self-reports from a series of compassion fatigue awareness classes revealed that the syndrome affects majorities of staff along the supervisory continuum, including teachers (64 percent), school principals (80 percent), and district administrators (56 percent). Secondary traumatic stress—defined as the emotional duress that results from hearing

another’s firsthand experience with trauma—was also a concern for teachers (45 percent), school principals (64 percent), and district administrators (44 percent).

Since exposure is a key factor in developing compassion fatigue, increased numbers of students affected by trauma correlated directly to the increased numbers of teachers and administrators at risk for developing compassion fatigue. When asked to identify how many of their current students experienced trauma, teachers reported 67 percent, principals said 75 percent, and district administrators, 75 percent.

“One of my students spent the first four years of his young life locked in a closet,” one teacher said. “He joined our class just weeks [after] being saved. Interacting with him and sharing new experiences with him touches me emotionally.”

An elementary teacher new to the profession shared another jarring story. “A student reported to me that she had witnessed her older sibling being molested by [their] stepdad,” the teacher said. “When she told mom, she and her sister were forced to sleep in the garage in winter. I called [child services]. They did not go to her house for 12 days. The stepdad never left, [and] she was forced to stay in this situation. I spent every night hoping that she was OK.”

Seeing the Symptoms

Symptoms can develop over a period of years, or after as little as six weeks on the job. Lowered tolerance for frustration, an aversion to working with certain students, and decreased job satisfaction are just a few of the effects that represent a significant risk to job performance as well as to teachers’ own personal, emotional, and physical well-being.


Compassion fatigue can produce a domino effect that affects all staff, school leaders say. “We deal with multiple traumatized students, and one of the hardest things to deal with is the burnout factor,” one teacher said. “It makes it 10 times more difficult to work with staff who are burned out and not emotionally present than the actual traumatized student or family.”

Take Action Against Fatigue

Awareness is key. School leaders must recognize that with increased incidences of student trauma come increased exposure and risk of compassion fatigue. To develop and implement plans for systemic care, collaboration with your district’s professional development

and human resources staff is important. Once these departments have an understanding of the correlation among compassion fatigue, job performance, and attrition, they can direct resources to a program model that includes awareness training, interventions/supports, and referrals.

Professional codes of ethics ask educators to monitor their own health and well-being to ensure effectiveness. We implemented a program adapted from the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology (www.greencross.org) to help teachers learn to monitor themselves for the signs of compassion fatigue and plan self-care activities.

By proactively addressing and mitigating the effects of compassion fatigue, districts can improve teacher effectiveness and satisfaction while benefiting students. 

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FIGHTING FATIGUE

After training, one participant said, “I will definitely be more aware of my own well-being and implement ways to keep myself healthy and motivated to do my job the best way I can.”

