

Compassion fatigue can happen to anyone—here's how you can overcome it

November 16 2023, by Carolina Pulido Ariza



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When tragic events happen, no matter how far away from us they are, it's hard not to pay attention. Many of us empathize with the people in these situations and wonder how we can get involved, or if there's anything we

can do to help.

Over the past few years, we've borne witness to a series of pivotal global events, from the COVID pandemic to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as many natural disasters. Just when it seemed that things could not get worse, last month conflict in Gaza escalated.

With so many tragedies following so closely after one another, some of us may be finding that as much as we want to engage with what's going on, we have no more sympathy left to give and would rather switch off from what's going on around us.

If you've been feeling this way, just know it doesn't mean you lack sympathy for others. Rather, it may be a sign that you have "compassion fatigue".

[Compassion fatigue](#) is a [stress response](#) that results in feelings of apathy or indifference towards those who are suffering.

This phenomenon is particularly common in health care. Health and [social workers](#) may be particularly prone because the nature of their work often means sharing the emotional burden of their patients.

Psychologists have also found that people with certain personality types may be at higher risk of experiencing compassion fatigue. For instance, people who tend to hold their emotions in, but are prone to pessimism and worrying, are [more susceptible](#).

The term is also increasingly used to describe a [general desensitization](#) of public concern for [social problems](#).

But why, as journalism professor Susan Moeller writes in her book "[Compassion Fatigue](#)," do we "seem to care less and less about the world

around us"—even when the [news stories](#) and images we see are so haunting and shocking?

Science offers us one explanation, and that is that an [excess of compassion](#) can lead to depression, burnout and feeling overwhelmed. Compassion fatigue acts as a "[survival strategy](#)" to overcome being exposed to the suffering of others.

The media may also partly play a role in this phenomenon. Many publications are aware that when there's a cascade of crises, our level of [concern appears to diminish](#).

So, publications strive to capture attention with [increasingly vivid content](#) to keep viewers engaged. According to Moeller, journalists do this by discarding events that lack drama or lethality compared to previous ones, or by employing bolder language and imagery in their stories.

This is then paired with near-constant exposure to the news—our phones giving us ready access to catastrophes and world events as they happen. This intensified and recurrent exposure to ever more vivid, distressing events creates an [ideal environment](#) for compassion fatigue to surface.

Regardless of the reasons you may be experiencing compassion fatigue, it isn't a permanent phenomenon. There are many techniques you can use to cope and overcome it. Here are some.

1. Acceptance

Don't feel guilty for feeling disengaged from the news. It's normal to find it distressing when hearing traumatic news stories, or seeing distressing images.

This coping technique is called [avoidance](#) and explains why so many of us want to [switch away](#) from troubling things.

Knowing and accepting that this is a normal response given the circumstances is the initial step to overcoming compassion fatigue.

2. Set boundaries

Take charge of your news intake by deactivating notifications and controlling when and how often you engage with it. Not only can this improve feelings of compassion fatigue, it may also have other benefits.

For example, excessive social media use can [disrupt sleep](#), so managing news consumption, especially before bedtime, can help.

3. Slow down

Witnessing others' suffering can trigger stress responses in our body, including an [accelerated heart rate](#).

If you find you're feeling anxious or stressed when consuming news, [relaxation techniques](#), such as meditation and [deep breathing](#), can help.

[Loving-kindness meditation](#) may be particularly helpful for improving well-being and compassion. This meditation technique involves focusing on the positive and cultivating feelings of love, compassion and goodwill towards oneself and others.

4. Connect with nature

Taking a walk in nature can help [reduce stress levels](#). This may also help to alleviate compassion fatigue, as elevated [cortisol levels](#) (known as the

"stress hormone") are linked to [chronic stress](#), burnout and emotional stress—all of which can worsen compassion fatigue.

5. Be nurturing

Caring for [plants](#) or [pets](#) profoundly affects well-being. Nurturing living things fosters personal fulfillment, and [companion animals](#) can reduce [negative emotions](#), mitigating some of the effects of compassion fatigue.

6. Take action

Try addressing problems you can solve instead of dwelling on insurmountable issues. [Volunteering](#) might be one way to do this. It's also linked to better mental and physical well-being.

Charitable giving can also increase [happiness](#) and [wellness](#), which may mitigate the effects of compassion fatigue.

These concrete actions can restore a sense of agency, reducing the helplessness associated with [compassion fatigue](#).

7. Seek support

If you're finding it difficult to cope or your [compassion fatigue](#) has been happening for some time, you might consider seeking support. A specialist or therapist may be helpful, but guided videos, tutorials or [online meditation resources](#) can also work.

Hopefully, by implementing these tools, you can reclaim agency over your emotions, accept them and work towards restoring your well-being.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative

Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Compassion fatigue can happen to anyone—here's how you can overcome it (2023, November 16) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-11-compassion-fatigue-anyonehere.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--