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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COACHING

go inward. move forward.

Compassion Fatigue: Taking Care When Caring Becomes Too Much

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At the end of 2020, an empathetic friend sent me a text that felt like she was waving the white flag. She wrote “Do you feel burnt out yet? Because I do. I’m dragging myself to the finish line. I’ve never felt empathetic burnout before this year”.

She further shared that she felt so depleted, she found herself retreating and pursuing ‘total escapism’ - coping through any activity that didn’t force her to face the state of things in the world. She finished with a metaphor that has stuck with me: “You cannot care about others if you are on fire.”

That resonated deeply. Throughout the pandemic as we’ve navigated the stress of the virus and other tensions and traumas - political, financial, systemic and more - it has often felt like the world is on fire. How can you properly care for your own home as it fills with smoke when the whole neighborhood is engulfed in flames?

Luckily, my friend is well-supported and has done a lot of inner work so her coping tools help her self-preserve and refill her empty cup instead of serving as self-destructive actions that could cause more harm to her wellbeing. Her tools include limiting news consumption, going to bed early, running, reading, art, creative writing and ‘trying not to beat myself up about every little failure.’ She knows what she needs to bring herself back to life and put out her own fire so she can continue caring for and giving to others... which is what empaths do.

Compassion fatigue is typically associated with people who work in caregiving and helping professions, where exposure to the pain and suffering of others is a regular part of the job. Pre-pandemic, people in those roles were already at risk. So, it makes sense that nurses, doctors, therapists, counsellors and all frontline workers are now being pushed to extreme limits, and experiencing extreme consequences as a result.

The current circumstances and state of the world are asking and tasking *all of us* to care and care-give in new and intense ways, in an atmosphere where we’re all exposed to pain and suffering on the regular. Caregivers of every kind, including parents and those providing care to extended family and community members, are struggling.

Compassion fatigue in its simplest form is the impact of being burnt out from caregiving, and anecdotally I’d add ‘from caring,’ period. Impacts can include apathy, hopelessness, numbness,



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overwhelm, feeling low, retreating and isolating, and a feeling that you have nothing left to give. It can be experienced physically, mentally and spiritually.

So, what do we do about this? [Compassionfatigue.org](https://www.compassionfatigue.org) suggests that “Providing authentic, sustainable self-care daily can help manage and lessen the disruptive issues associated with compassion fatigue.”

Sounds easy enough in theory. In practice though, most of us, especially helpers and empaths, aren't very good at making space for self-care, and many don't even know how to define it for themselves.

Another complication is that most of us have been taught that it's more noble to take care of others before taking care of ourselves. The guilt that so many people experience as a result of adopting this destructive belief results in people getting in the way of their own self-care.

Re-Framing Self-Care as an Essential Service for Caregivers

In my workshop on self-care, I invite people to adopt a new relationship with the world 'selfish' by adding a hyphen to create some space, making it “Self-ish.”

Adopting a self-ish approach to self-care means recognizing that we don't choose ourselves over others when we focus on our self-care. Instead, we honour both. You know that oxygen mask that falls from the ceiling of the airplane when trouble hits? You're told to put on your mask before assisting others. Why? Because if your oxygen is cut off, there's no way you're going to be able to save anyone else.

Caring for ourselves does not mean disregarding the needs of others. It means refueling our tank so we don't show up empty for others. Self-care is as much about the ones we love, support and care for as it is about ourselves.

Let that sink in and write it down somewhere where you can't escape or hide from it. Let it be your permission slip, or even better, your prescription as a caregiver right now. Self-care isn't a nice to have or a 'maybe I'll fit it in when I find time.' It is an essential service for all caregivers and helpers, and it needs to be protected and re-prioritized on our to-do lists.

Authentic, Sustainable Self-Care

A question I hear often from clients and participants in my corporate and private workshops is “how do I make time and space for self-care when I barely have time for anything right now?”



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The other thing that's become tragically clear is that many people don't know what self-care looks like for them. If you can't grasp what it means for you, how on earth are you going to make it a priority?

The authentic part of 'authentic, sustainable self-care' means looking inward and asking yourself what you really need to refuel, instead of looking to emulate other people's versions of self-care. No one knows what you need better than you do, and no one knows what's realistic for you (ie: sustainable!) better than you.

Asking yourself "what do I really *need* right now?" when you're depleted is different than asking what you *want*. You may want to reach for an unhealthy, unhelpful coping tool, when what you really need is to rest. You may want to sit in front of the TV for hours on end, when what you really need is to move your body to release tension. True self-care is taking care of your true needs.

For me, regular self-care includes acupuncture, yoga-nidra sleep meditation, and moving my body - usually by walking outside in fresh air, but even dancing out my tense energy with my daughter or on my own will suffice.

When I experience compassion fatigue, I know I need to get quiet and make my world a little smaller for a short while. It doesn't mean shutting people out; it requires me to give my needs a voice, and let the people in my circle know where I'm at. I may temporarily not be as responsive or talkative, but I allow myself to take that space for as long as I need to replenish my energy.

The excuse "I don't have time" may feel like a hard fact to you. But if you really question yourself, you may see how this idea is sabotaging your ability to care for yourself. When we re-frame self-care as a crucial piece of caring for others, it usually opens a doorway.

If you're still stuck, try giving self-care a new name. Block off time in your calendar for whatever your version of tending to your needs happens to be, and give it a name that will remind you of what it's really about: "replenishment hour" or "refueling my tank for others." Make it meaningful with a label that recognizes that *your care* is also about those you care for.

Yoga nidra is my 'rest medicine,' and acupuncture is my 're-grounding' so I can be grounded for others. Giving these things a name I can get behind helps protect them with non-negotiable boundaries.

Becoming Self-Compassionate Care-Givers



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Early in the pandemic I watched a virtual talk with author and speaker Elizabeth Gilbert, where she described the difference between empathy and compassion like this:

Empathy = if I feel your pain, I can't help you with your pain because now I'm in pain and I can't be a helper.

Compassion = holding space for someone's pain without taking it on yourself.

She cautioned: "In these times when there is more need than we have resources for, replace empathy with compassion."

Empathy is sitting in the pit of struggle with the person who's struggling. Compassion is holding the person as they sit in that pit, supporting them and caring for them but not suffering in the depths of it yourself.

It's important to ask ourselves where we're at, and recognize when empathy is causing us to suffer. If you find yourself taking on the pain of others, try using that visual of doing what you need to do (self-care) to get out of the pit, and hold space for them instead.

Self-compassion is how you hold space for yourself, the person giving compassion to others. Building on that visual, you can hold space for YOU while at the same time holding it for others. It's like having one arm lovingly wrapped around yourself, while holding everyone else with the other.

When you're compassionate toward yourself, you validate your own experience and recognize its impact on you. What's true for you might include feeling overwhelmed, resentful and even burdened by the things you're shouldering. When we judge ourselves for those kinds of hard truths, that creates even more distress. So, a really key piece of self-compassion right now is validating our hard truths without judging or silver-lining them.

I hear a lot of silver lining from clients these days: "At least I'm not sick; other people have it way worse; I'm lucky I'm still employed even though I'm struggling to care for my family," etc.

Our blessings don't negate our true experiences of what's hard right now. We can validate our struggles and still be grateful for the good in our lives. One doesn't erase the other.

Acknowledging that our challenges are hard without striving to solve them or judge ourselves for having them is an act of self-compassion.



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Be a self-compassionate caregiver by asking yourself what you need to hear in moments of struggle and offering yourself those words, speaking to yourself with the same loving kindness as you would with a friend.

Responsibility & Asking Hard Questions

Carrying the weight of the world as well as our own responsibilities can lead us to overwhelm and a skewed view of what is actually ours to shoulder. A key question to ask yourself, though it requires taking the emotion and complex dynamics out for a moment to look only at the facts, is this: What am I actually responsible for?

How might you be inflating your sense of responsibility and adding weight or extra to-dos to the pile?

Another good check-in question: What's not mine to bear?

Be honest with yourself and ask what weights can be reasonably be lifted, shared or passed along to someone else, even for a short time. When you're burnt out, extras need to go. That freed up energy can go into self-care.

Consider where you're turning to re-fuel by asking, "Is this self-care, self-preservation and or/replenishment, or is this self-destructive coping?" Sometimes we can't tell the difference until we ask ourselves some hard questions.

Finally, if your coping is destructive, if the weight is truly unbearable and you're struggling to replenish and self-preserve, please reach out for help. Therapy, counselling, support networks are also part of essential self-care if and when we need those resources.

ABOUT JENNY



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Jenny Tryansky is an ICF-credentialed Certified Professional Co-Active Coach with a **whole life/whole person approach**.

In her private practice, she works virtually with clients around the world, specializing in working one-on-one with people who are driven yet highly self-critical.

She coaches clients to build meaningful, authentic lives, tackling personal and professional challenges with self-compassion and resilience, as they move forward toward their goals fuelled with confidence instead of self-criticism.

In addition to coaching private clients, Jenny is a writer, speaker, workshop & group leader and mindful self-compassion advocate.

She juggles life in Toronto with her husband and young daughter, and her work with clients around the world.

Connect with Jenny on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) and read her [articles with helpful resources](#) on her [website](#).

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