

NEBRASKA LICENSEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

A SERVICE OF BEST CARE EAP

COMPASSION FATIGUE AND THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL

Working in the healthcare profession is a very rewarding vocation. Most people who work in these professions choose to do so because they enjoy working with people, taking care of their health needs and making a difference in their lives. However, the process of helping others can be stressful and sometimes very taxing on one's physical and emotional health. Our professional work can drain us of our energy and contribute to a host of physical and emotional problems, including the abuse of alcohol or other substances. According to Charles Figley, Ph.D, compassion fatigue is defined as "a state of exhaustion and dysfunction biologically, psychologically, and socially as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress and all it invokes" (Figley, C.R., 1995).

Compassion fatigue is an indicator that our lives are out of balance and changes need to be made to restore our physical and emotional health. It gives us an opportunity for self-assessment and growth towards a more balanced life. However, this only occurs if we recognize the problem and deal with it in a positive manner.

The symptoms of compassion fatigue are similar to those of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, only instead of the symptoms being based upon a trauma that you directly experienced, they are due to the trauma that your clients/patients have experienced. Symptoms include:

- Appetite disturbances
- Unexplained physical pains
- Persistent frustration, irritability, anxiety, and discouragement
- Consistently feeling emotionally and/or physically drained
- Reduced empathy
- Fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping and/or experiencing nightmares
- Decreased interest in family, recreational, or spiritual activities
- Increase in time spent alone/withdrawal from others
- Loss of enthusiasm for work and dread of going to work
- Tardiness to work and need to leave work early
- Excessive use of sick time or vacation days
- Finding it difficult to separate your personal life from your work life
- Increased use of alcohol, prescription medications, or illegal substances
- If in recovery, decline in interest in personal recovery program
- If in recovery, relapse

If you recognize that you are suffering from compassion fatigue and/or are abusing alcohol or other substances, you will need to reestablish a healthy balance in your life. You can accomplish this by getting proper nutrition, regular exercise, and necessary rest; prioritizing personal and professional needs; setting realistic expectations and goals, and affirming reasonable personal and work boundaries. If you are in a recovery program "dry spell," return to recovery support group meetings, and talking to your sponsor. If you have relapsed, consider scheduling an appointment with the Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program (NE LAP) for immediate assistance with determining your treatment and recovery needs. There are many resources available to help you restore your health and happiness, and ensure you can continue to compassionately care for others.

If you are a licensed health or health-related service professional wanting more information about sobriety and recovery, please contact the NE LAP at (800) 851-2336 or (402) 354-8055 or visit our web site at www.lapne.org. If you would like to consult with the NE LAP, or schedule an assessment or an educational presentation, please ask for Michelle Hruska, NE LAP Coordinator, or Nicole Winkler, NE LAP Counselor.

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