

# Compassion Fatigue

As a student leader, you care. You care about your peers. You care about your college community. You care about making a difference. You care about the projects you complete. You care about the reputation of the campus department or group you represent.

The student who disclosed to you that she was sexually assaulted at a party last week weighs heavily on your mind. The organizational member who shared she is struggling with tuition payments keeps you thinking. The student who asked you for help determining how to approach a friend she thinks is being hazed keeps you on edge.

So, where do you draw the line? What impact do all of these issues actually have on your emotional, physical, and spiritual self? Perhaps they are having more of an impact than you think.

## What Exactly is Compassion Fatigue?

Much of the research done on compassion fatigue (CF) focuses on caregivers; those people taking care of elderly parents, counselors working with troubled clients, and others. Some of the professionals most at risk for CF include medical professionals, human service workers, counselors, mental health professionals, advocates, emergency care workers, and the clergy.

Just take a look at that list. As a student leader, you may have served one or more of the functions listed there within the past month, wouldn't you say?

Compassion Fatigue (CF) is a syndrome consisting of various symptoms that mirror Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a disorder that affects people who have experienced extreme traumatic or violent events in their lives such as severe car accidents, plane crashes, natural disasters, or abuse. People who develop PTSD report episodes of fear, depression, confusion, and hopelessness.

While those who experience CF have not necessarily been direct victims of trauma, as the "helper" they



...that it is okay to put yourself first sometimes. We sometimes feel guilty putting ourselves first.

But, in reality, if we don't take care of ourselves, how can we care for others? Consider posting the following question (adapted from a quote by an unknown source) to affirm that caring for yourself is most important:

*"If you don't take care of your body, where else are you going to live?"*

still experience an impact on their personal cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, interpersonal, and physical functioning. This is sometimes referred to as "secondary trauma."

## Signs & Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

As a student leader, you often take on the problems of others, from the teammate who has a conflict with your advisor to a friend who is dealing with his parents' divorce. Yet, you can't solve these things all on your own—and you may harm yourself in the process. Compassion fatigue may kick in, with symptoms that include:

- An overused sense of compassion that leads to a lack of ability to feel or to care for others
- An accumulated fatigue that can take months or years to surface
- Re-experiencing the trauma of a situation or a student's experience, even after the incident is over
- Avoiding any reminders of an event or numbing yourself to it
- Losing your sense of self to the students you serve—getting so wrapped up in their issues that you leave yourself behind

Get help if you've reached this point.