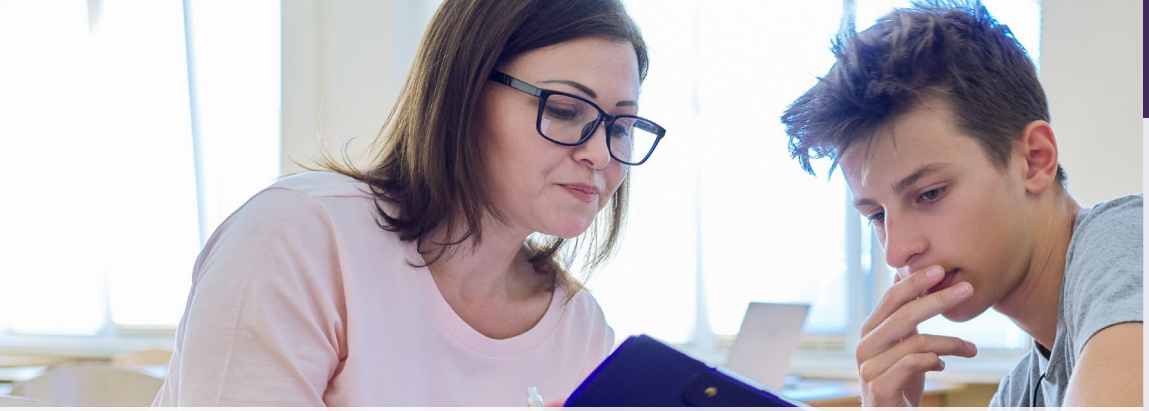

When Caring Starts to Feel Heavy

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
Therapists, case managers, counselors, outreach staff, nonprofit and social service providers

Description
This short exercise guides you through a set of simple reflection prompts that help you notice early warning signs before they deepen into compassion fatigue. By checking in with how you are feeling physically, emotionally, and mentally, you can get an honest picture of where your energy levels are and whether your current level of stress is sustainable. The goal is not to alarm you, but to give you useful information so you can make informed decisions about rest, boundaries, peer support, or professional care.

This Tool May Help When
This short exercise can help you notice early signals that your emotional energy may be running low.

WORKPLACE STRESS

People who work in human and community services often care deeply about the people they serve. Over time, regular exposure to trauma, crisis, and hardship can begin to drain emotional energy.

This experience is called compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue can develop when people spend long periods supporting others through difficult experiences. It does not mean someone is weak or uncaring. In fact, it often affects people who are highly committed to helping others.

THE PRACTICE

Step 1

Notice the Early Signals

Think about the past two weeks and check the statements that feel true for you.

- ☐ I feel emotionally drained at the end of most workdays
- ☐ I'm less patient with clients, coworkers, or family members
- ☐ I catch myself feeling numb or emotionally distant in situations that used to affect me
- ☐ I find myself thinking "nothing I do really makes a difference"
- ☐ I feel more cynical about my work than I used to
- ☐ I feel overwhelmed by the amount of need around me
- ☐ I have trouble leaving work stress behind at the end of the day
- ☐ I feel physically exhausted even when I have rested

If you checked several of these statements, it may be a signal that your emotional resources are becoming stretched. These reactions are common among people working in helping professions.

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THE PRACTICE

Step 2

Identify What Is Draining Your Energy

Take a moment to reflect.

What situations or patterns have felt most draining recently?

Examples might include:

- Repeated exposure to traumatic stories
- High caseloads or constant time pressure
- System barriers that prevent people from getting the help they need
- Feeling responsible for problems that are outside your control
- Limited support, resources, or recognition

Write down what feels most difficult right now.

_____

_____

_____

Step 3

Notice What Is Still Working

Compassion fatigue can make it easy to focus only on what is going wrong.

Take a moment to identify something that is still meaningful or working well in your role.

Examples might include:

- A client who made progress
- A moment of connection or trust
- Something you handled skillfully
- A small positive outcome

Write one example

_____

_____

_____

Step 4

Choose One Small Support Action

If your emotional energy feels low, choose one small action that may help restore balance.

Examples include:

- Talking with a trusted coworker or supervisor
- Taking a short break away from emotionally intense work
- Stepping outside for fresh air or movement
- Adjusting expectations where possible
- Scheduling time for rest or an activity that restores you

Write one action you can take this week.

_____

_____

_____

Step 5

A Final Reflection

Helping professions require a great deal of emotional energy. Taking care of yourself is not separate from the work. It is part of sustaining the ability to care for others over time.

Finish this sentence: *One thing that helps me recharge outside of work is...*

_____

_____

_____

WHY THIS HELPS

Creating small end-of-day rituals can help reduce stress and make it easier to mentally disconnect from work.

WHY THIS WORKS

Making space for this activity regularly can help protect against compassion fatigue and burnout.

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org
Looking to go deeper? Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community.
Check out the website here for additional details.

Source: *This tool was informed by research on compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout among helping professionals, including the work of Figley (1995, 2002) and the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) framework developed by Stamm (2010).*