

DEALING WITH COMPASSION FATIGUE

BY MARY FOWLER

As do other service professionals, teachers can experience secondary traumatic stress. When children hurt, we hurt too. This can wear us out—physically, emotionally and mentally. Use these coping strategies to build your resistance to secondary trauma and engage in a regular program of self-care.

Many new teachers leave our profession within the first two to five years. Though I didn't stray far afield, I, too, became a professional statistic—a classroom dropout. Believe me, the reasons were varied. Mainly, I wasn't prepared for the helplessness I felt when my idealism and inexperience came face to face with the horrific narratives most of my students lived day in and out. Simply stated, I was in over my head but felt like a failure.

Teaching is a helping profession. Though we don't often speak of it as such, much of what we do goes beyond our curricula. My first job as a helping professional began in an inner-city dropout prevention program shortly after race riots gutted many cities.

Back then, the term "adverse life experiences" didn't exist, yet every one of my students had circumstances beyond my wildest 22-year-old imagination. In time, I came to appreciate the unmitigated power of traumatic events to obliterate a personal sense of safety, control and hopefulness. Teaching in hard-knock neighborhoods often takes a harsh toll on every member of the school community.

My work in Trenton was funded by a one-year grant. Relieved when the program was over, I chose a job doing something else. In time, I returned to the classroom in a suburban school. There, buses provided safe transport. Parents called with questions and addressed teacher concerns. "How sweet it is," I thought. Then, in the spring, one of my eighth graders took his life. No one saw this coming. There was little awareness of youth suicide. Schools didn't have crisis teams back then, yet the entire staff stepped up to the plate. That's what we teachers do. We help.

Harsh times, adverse experiences, disasters, other traumas and loss—these are a part of life. When children hurt, they don't check their tragic experiences at the door. Because many of us are emotionally available to our learners, students often bring their stories to us, the people they trust. Competent, caring and concerned, we bear witness to the suffering of our students. Because we are human, we may also bear the burden.

When children hurt, we the compassionate, competent adults in their lives hurt too—whether or not we are aware of the toll it takes on us. We may also pack personal histories that become activated when another's trauma hits close to home. Compassion fatigue expert Charles Figley writes: "Any educator who works directly with traumatized children and adolescents is vulnerable to the effects of trauma."

Trauma experts refer to this vulnerability as secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN.org) defines secondary traumatic stress as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another." Secondary traumatic stress (STS) wears us out—physically, emotionally and mentally. It's especially prevalent when we feel overwhelmed and are working in unsupportive and demanding environments.

THE LOOK AND FEEL OF STS

Teachers are not immune to human emotions. No smart board or dry erase marker magically protects us from feeling another's pain. STS reactions may seep or crash into our systems.

We may find ourselves a little less patient, snarky, or

"Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others."

- Parker Palmer, author and educator

perhaps angry and frustrated. We may yell, slam books or make threats. Work obligations, focusing and planning, decision making or record keeping become more difficult. Headaches, stomachaches and back pain frequently appear. We may wall off our caring or tell students we don't have time to listen. Or we may listen—but without compassion. We might even get angry with the traumatized student (the real victim) or blame the student's family. Some of us become jaded and cynical.

We lose the creative spark and spontaneity that made teaching fun. The joy of teaching? We may question whether it ever existed. And when you add in all the new initiatives educators face today—all of it becomes too much. Suddenly we notice we really do not feel physically well. In fact, we may find ourselves susceptible to every seasonal flu or cold virus.

Attempting to ignore or minimize the impact of STS is a harmful way to numb feelings and physical sensations. Not addressing the personal impact brought by another's suffering leads to helplessness and hopelessness. Burnout is much harder to reverse.

Perhaps you are thinking "I signed up as an educator, not a counselor. I'm not going to let this stuff get to me." If only it were that simple.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON. BUT, WHEN IT'S OVER, TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Recognition is the key to self-care. If you want to know whether you lean toward compassion satisfaction or fatigue, STS, or border on burnout, download the free Professional Quality of Life Scale at PROQOL.org. This site also provides a variety of resources and tips for coping and self-care.

Care for your *self* does not mean knocking you out with manic or mindless activity, self-medicating or other avoidance strategies. It's not the junk food lunch, the liquid dinner, the half-gallon of ice cream consumed as a couch potato. Nor is it doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result.

Perhaps becoming a classroom dropout seems enticing or advisable. A new career or job may provide relief. Without self-change this quick fix is usually temporary. Self-care requires a conscious, deliberate implementation of well-being strategies. STS recovery and restoration invites us to look at what we have and what we need in order to create a plan to access our resources. We then implement well-being strategies. Seeking professional help may be necessary. If so, don't hesitate. Mental health is physical health.

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO TO DEAL? LESSONS FROM SANDY

"Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well." - Robert Louis Stevenson

When Superstorm Sandy slammed into our state, the losses far exceeded the brick, stick and mortar homes devastated by the flooding waters. For many children and families, Sandy significantly displaced their emotional foundation—the sense of personal safety, belonging and control that help us meet

SYMPTOMS & CONDITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH STS

Hypervigilance—on guard, expecting the worst to happen

Minimizing—make mountains into molehills (no big deal, so what?)

Fearful—worry excessively, all molehills become mountains

Hopelessness—nothing will make a difference

Disconnection—numb or space out not to see or feel

Poor boundaries—try to solve other's problems, take on more than you can handle

Social withdrawal—avoid friends, colleagues, activities you enjoy

Desensitized to violence—act as if it's reasonable for the environment

Avoid situations and conflicts—often at personal price

Diminished self-care—ignore or don't care about personal well-being or appearance

Survival Coping—living by fighting, fleeing or avoiding

Guilt, anger, cynicism, chronic exhaustion, sleeplessness, physical ailments

Source: *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN.org)*

and greet life's hard challenges. For some, the storm was not the first devastating event to flood their physical and emotional foundations. Despite Sandy's impact, the resilience I've been privileged to see and to foster as a helping professional has been extraordinary.

Presently, I'm involved in three programs that help people locate the good cards they hold and play the entire hand better. Following are resilience-building and coping strategies skimmed from these best practices. If you, your loved ones, your students, and/or your school community are struggling, use these suggestions. None of the ideas will come as a surprise or produce a glorious "AHA." You'll probably recognize them. You may have even tried a few—possibly casually?

One caveat: Suggestions without your personal implementation plan are like most things we hope to remember to do: out of sight, out of mind. Literally! Well-made plans bring positive results.

Always begin with a personal inventory of your resources and strengths. What is working? For improvement areas you identify, jot down a few notes: What do I have already? What do I need or want to improve? Who can help me? What's my plan? How will I know if it's working?

START SMALL. Ask yourself: What one small change can I make that will start a course correction? Too often we go for the extreme make-over. Walk, don't leap.

Little steps take us there. For instance, if you are powering up on too much caffeine, could you substitute green tea for one or two cups? Could you commit for a month? Keep a daily score? It may seem insignificant, but following through on a small step is

*"Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well."
- Robert Louis Stevenson*

making a commitment and regaining a sense of mastery over your life. Write down your goal and action plan—and add a column to note your progress.

DO NOT GO IT ALONE. Teaching can be very isolating. Research on resilience and positive coping consistently emphasizes the importance and great value of social connection and belonging. We need each other. Self-care doesn't mean all *by yourself*. It means *care for your "self."*

Consider creating a small on-site support network or perhaps an off-site group for people who want to implement well-being strategies. Avoid any group that wants to "romance" the problem and remain in the drama. The goal is to recover and restore your balance. We connect with others for mutual support.

SEEK HEALTHY SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS. Make a list of all the people in your social world. Who are your positive friends? Your most important connections? Who can you go to for advice or help? Who brings you down? Who do you want to spend more time with? Less time? Who needs your help or support? Do you have supportive family? If not, who can fill this role? Make a written plan to improve your healthy social connections.

MANAGE REACTIONS. Nothing manages reaction better than the breath. The simple act of deliberately and slowly breathing in and breathing out calms your sympathetic nervous system and thus quiets your biology. You restore homeostasis. When you commit to a daily practice of breathing, start small. Try to go from two to five minutes and ultimately to 15 minutes two times a day. You will notice that taking a calming breath becomes your default switch.

Consider adding a mindfulness practice to the breath work of managing reactions. What do you get? An ability to feel your emotions, witness your troubling thoughts, your anxieties, your worries, and your agitation—without judging, shaming or blaming. When distressing thoughts and troubling sensations arise, breathing without judging the experience helps us be okay with what is. When we accept what is, we then can become creative agents of change.

Many contemplative practices lead us to our inner resources. Mindfulness is suggested here because it's well-researched and evidence-based. No matter what biological quieting practice you use, managing your reactions responsively is the desired result. The book, *Mindfulness for Beginners*, comes with a guided CD—it's great for individual practice or to facilitate a school-based faculty practice.

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES. What gives you juice? What helps you zone in to disengage from troubles and stress? Indoor or outdoor activities? Group activities? Volunteer activities? Expressive arts? Hiking, biking, surfing, skiing? Knitting? Gardening? Is there something you're itching to try?

MAKE A WEEKLY CALENDAR. List the activities you can do under the days you can do them. Resist cramming or telling yourself you don't have time! Have

something to look forward to on your weekend—even if you have only an hour.

GENEROSITY. Serving others is a positive activity that has been shown to give the giver more than she or he gave. Swing a hammer for Habitat for Humanity or help rebuild the Jersey Shore. There's still a lot to do. The generous idea is to do something not connected to your teaching profession that fulfills you and helps others.

These practices probably won't bring instant relief or change. They do move you in the direction of higher ground. By embracing them, you are making a positive difference in your life by taking care of your gift—you. That's the essence of self-care: becoming the change you want to see in your world.

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