

## Preventing Compassion Fatigue

By Charmaine Hammond, MA, BA

As you and your team members return to the community and resume putting your organization (and personal lives) back together - anticipate challenges. The challenges that surface may be ones that you had not considered and may take you by surprise.

It is important for leaders to maintain contact with their employees during this transition time. In most organizations, staff, board members and volunteers are scattered across the county, so when the team returns to the community and back to work, may be the first time they have seen or connected with one another in the last six weeks or more. This, on top of everything else you have all been through, is disruptive to the team.

If you haven't been holding regular conference calls or virtual team meetings with the staff, it is important to do so. Communication and the team feeling "together" is important for the organization, and the moving forward process. Team members will want and need to share their stories with one another. Sometimes old issues or frustrations with one another (that existed before the evacuation) become more pronounced when people return to work. The real challenge here will be that from an organizational development perspective, 80%-100% of the problems are apparent, known and even obvious to the staff, less than 25% of the issues will be apparent to Managers, and, less than 10% of the problems are known to the leadership or executive team.

You will likely see a surge of energy as people pull together to get things up and running, and to serve clients. After a while, you may see members of your team who have been eternally positive and hopeful become complacent. It is like having someone's energy squashed or that a heavy blanket has been put over them. It could be warning signs of compassion fatigue. Compassion Fatigue is well known in other trauma-related occupations such as health care, military service, first-responders for emergencies, and the media that cover disasters. It is also commonly seen in those involved in animal rights, rescue and sheltering. Compassion Fatigue is also referred to as Vicarious Traumatization and Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Compassion Fatigue is the negative impact of working with those affected by trauma and suffering. Compassion Fatigue can have similar symptoms to burnout, however the onset of Compassion Fatigue can occur more rapidly than burnout, and it can resolve itself more readily. Compassion Fatigue can quickly impact those already predisposed to a nurturing and caring-

type personality, those empathic/highly sensitive individuals who put others needs before their own.

Caring too much can have lasting impacts, and not all positive. Care for the caregiver is so very important. When caregivers focus on others without practicing resilience building activities and self-care, destructive behaviors can surface. Apathy, isolation, pent up and unresolved emotions and substance abuse a few of the many symptoms associated with the Compassion Fatigue.

Here are a few tips to help you and your team:

- 1) Ensure you begin the team communication and team rebuilding process
- 2) Practice Self Care on a daily basis, and remind your staff to do the same
- 3) Set healthy emotional boundaries
- 4) Build a strong support network and encourage your staff to have a network of support outside their team
- 5) Reduce or minimize as much workplace stress as possible. Deal with little frustrations early.
- 6) Use Active (instead of withdrawal based) coping skills which may include humor, social support, and planning your time, priorities and schedule.
- 7) Practice mindfulness and self-awareness

Remember, you are all human... leaders don't need to be perfect, have all the answers and fix every problem. Healthy resilient leaders will lead their team more successfully through these times of recovery, rebuilding and resilience.