



Learning Modules:

- 1. Compassion Fatigue (pages 2 – 5)**
- 2. How to Prevent Compassion Fatigue (pages 6 – 9)**

Take a moment to consider your own experiences with traumatic events, evidence, material, or cases.

Through exposure to the realities of files involving cruelty and through the participation and re-enactments of these events in the judicial process, lawyers and judges are vulnerable to psychological effects of trauma.

This learning module is designed to give you the knowledge and tools to identify and prevent compassion fatigue in yourself, your colleagues, friends, and family.

For general and contact information, please refer to pages 10 and 11.



Alberta Lawyers'
Assistance Society

Lesson 1: Compassion Fatigue

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is defined as the cumulative physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological effects of being continually exposed to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity.

Compassion fatigue is also known as vicarious trauma, or secondary trauma. It is the natural behaviour and emotion resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by another person and the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a person who may be traumatized.

Compassion fatigue is a disruption of the ordinary level of psychological and emotional functioning.

This disruption can adversely affect lawyers and judges and can reduce their level of functioning and quality of life and health.

Why Does Compassion Fatigue Occur?

Compassion fatigue for lawyers working in the criminal justice or family law sectors includes three essential elements:

- An emotional and psychological disruption suffered by the legal professional.
- The disruption would be caused as a consequence of fulfilling professional obligations to manage the traumatic material, to achieve or pursue a helping objective for another.
- The professional obligations would involve engagement with a person (a client, witness, or victim) who has experienced a significant traumatic event.

What Are The Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue?

Symptoms of compassion fatigue vary person to person.

The range of symptoms can include:

- Sleep disturbance;
- Lethargy;
- Anxiety and Irritability;
- Sense of futility;
- Loss of self-confidence;

- Pessimism about people;
- Isolation; and,
- Avoidance of caregiving **OR** submersion of self in caregiving with unreasonable expectations of a successful outcome.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue may trigger **immediate traumatic reactions**.

Reactions may include:

- **Hyper-arousal**: fast heartbeat, altered respiration, cold sweats, and tingling;
- **Constriction**: narrowing of focus and hyper-vigilance;
- **Dissociation**: dopiness, not being present, out of body, and derealisation; and,
- **Freezing**: immobility and helplessness.

Who Is at Risk?

All law professionals may be at risk for compassion fatigue.

However, those who have the greatest risk of compassion fatigue are:

- Lawyers and judges dealing with criminal or family law, or other practice areas, including bankruptcy and insolvency.
- Lawyers, judges, and other court workers who come into contact with individuals that have suffered physical and psychological violence.
- Lawyers and judges who review material depicting violent and distressing events. "Traumatic material" is outside of normal experience and is overwhelming to both the primary sufferer and to an engaged professional's sense of physical and psychological security.

Who Is at Risk?

Other law professionals at risk for compassion fatigue can include those with:

- High caseloads and long work hours;
- High exposure to graphic evidence, 911 tapes, photos, videotapes, and victim impact statements;
- Little education on the subject of compassion fatigue; and,
- Little support from their peers, or those who have no debriefing policies in place.

What Are the Risk Factors?

Personal factors and stress on an individual level may also increase the risk of compassion fatigue.

Individual and life situation risk factors can include:

- Historic or current trauma;
- Health problems;

- Alcohol or drug issues;
- Poor job performance;
- Depression or anxiety; and,
- Domestic issues-spouse/partner, children, parents.

What Are the Risk Factors?

Occupational factors and stress in the workplace may also increase the risk of compassion fatigue.

Risk factors may include:

- Heavy caseloads and long hours;
- Inefficient administration;
- Excessive paperwork;
- Inadequate resources to meet the demands;
- Lack of supportive supervision;
- Poor executive leadership;
- Being overlooked for credit, accolades or promotions;
- Patronization or micro-management of subordinates;
- Malicious behaviour/verbal attacks; and,
- Lack of communication.

Long- and Short-Term Effects of Compassion Fatigue

Lawyers and judges when exposed to traumatic stories and events may have physiological reactions such as increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, acute muscle tension, and greater emotional responses such as anger or fear.

They may also experience changes in their assumptions about life, other people, and issues of safety.

Those who suffer from compassion fatigue often **isolate themselves** at work and limit communication with their clients or coworkers. They can become sick often and miss work, ultimately burn out, require medical leave, or leave their jobs.

Some people with compassion fatigue start to **dehumanize their clients**, choosing to view them as case studies, rather than human beings. This can block the story of those receiving advice or service and increase the likelihood of mistakes in dealing with their situation.

Those afflicted with compassion fatigue often experience change at home.

Compassion fatigue sufferers often stop doing the things they once enjoyed, as they feel burned out by the end of the day.

They often zone out in front of the TV, and disconnect from their family and friends.

Why is Compassion Fatigue Important to Understand for Those in the Legal Profession?

Legal professionals may be unaware of reactions to compassion fatigue or dismiss them as unimportant. These reactions are indicative of the physiological and psychological changes occurring within the mind or body. If left unchecked and unattended to, these reactions can wear on the mind and body resulting in the cluster of symptoms described earlier.

The legal profession can often embody increased demand with limited resources, and retirement can get pushed off to the distant future.

Clients can sometimes be unrealistic, unhappy, sad, mad, frustrated, etc. Repeated exposure to highly emotional and unrealistic clients can cause compassion fatigue.

Continue to *Lesson 2: How to Prevent Compassion Fatigue* to learn how to prevent compassion fatigue and for strategies to cope with it.



Lesson 2: How to Prevent Compassion Fatigue

How to Prevent Compassion Fatigue

Most workplace issues can be attributed to communication patterns, structures, and personalities.

Organizational self-care combined with individual self-care will reduce the effects of compassion fatigue. Implementing education and awareness strategies on compassion fatigue, and debriefing (either one-to-one or as a forum) will help overcome or avoid the symptoms.

Preventing Compassion Fatigue

There are a variety of strategies to prevent or cope with compassion fatigue at the workplace.

Implement organizational strategies to prevent compassion fatigue:

- 1. Social Justice:** Remember why you do what you do.
 - If necessary, restore the commitment to the organization's ideology.
 - Build and maintain community partnerships.
 - Establish a framework and support staff time to get involved and report back to the organization.
- 2. Organizational Structure:** Facilitate a work environment that promotes autonomy, support, and trust.
 - Define (in writing) the operating structure and philosophy of the organization.
 - Determine the decision-making structure.
 - Define (in writing) staff participation in policy planning and development.
 - Promote staff autonomy in decisions relating to clients.
- 3. Human Resource Policy and Practices:** Looking after the people who look after people
 - Discuss compassion fatigue at orientation or interview process.
 - Provide a thorough orientation for new hires.
 - Spend on the vacation budget and encourage staff to take their allotted time.
 - Provide personal days to staff and management.

- Be committed to financial compensation that achieves pay equity.
- Implement extended health care benefits.
- Define a code of conduct, professional ethics, and principles of service.
- 360-degree feedback for employees and management – act on the results.
- Ensure employees get regular and valuable supervision.
- Ensure regular staff opportunities to debrief.
- Normalize compassion fatigue in your office, and deal with it appropriately.
- Celebrate accomplishments.

Individual Strategies

There are many ways to prevent or cope with compassion fatigue on a personal level.

As an individual:

- Evaluate your physical and mental health regularly.
- Accept yourself and others. Remind yourself of the value that you are working to achieve.
- Strive to achieve a non-judgmental attitude of self and others.
- Put a holistic plan in place. Assist has resources on how to implement a plan for happiness and health.
- Recognize the risks specific to you and your life.
- Debrief with a colleague or friend. Talk about what is personally or professionally disturbing about the information at hand, subject to solicitor/client confidentiality.
- Take an inventory of how balanced your life is and be intentional about balance.
- Maintain alternative intellectual pursuits, such as analyzing sports stats or reading. This can prevent the mind from falling into a traditional legal rut.
- Maintain a connection with a community that is separate from your career.
- Consider varying your work diet, by taking on work that does not involve traumatized clients. The impacts of vicarious trauma are moderated.
- Find a spiritual home. Spirituality is the resource that provides the kind of confidence and assurance that can complement a lawyer's competence.
- Evaluate your tension reducing behaviours and recognize what works for you.
- Don't deny negative emotions (fear, sadness, anxiety) - try to accept them.
- Sleep well, exercise often, laugh frequently, and eat whole, nutritious food.
- Express gratitude for the people and things that matter most to you.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand the internal experiences of another.

Empathy is the basic human characteristic that connects individuals, allowing for successful interactions and communication.

The theory behind empathy states that people understand others' current actions using analysis based on previous experiences of similar actions.

Empathy and Mirror Neurons

The discovery of mirror neurons in several areas of the brain has lent support to the simulation theory of empathy (i.e. the modeling of others' experiences in one's mind).

Mirror neurons are so named because they fire not only when one is performing an action, but also when one is observing another performing that action. Essentially, mirror neurons allow one to experience what another is experiencing without going through the motions oneself.

Empathy and Mirror Neurons

An aspect of empathy, the ability to feel what another is feeling, also reflects the importance of mirror neurons.

Brain areas activated when one is in pain are also activated when one observes another's pain.

The understanding of another's experience can be achieved without full immersion in another's feelings or experience, hence mirror neurons create a "reflection" of another's experience rather than completely recreating that experience.

Importance of Debriefing

In stressful practices where lawyers are exposed to distressing situations and stressed clients, debriefing can be very helpful.

Debriefing reduces the possibility of psychological harm by talking about one's experience.

In some family law practices, lawyers debrief regularly to protect themselves from compassion fatigue. In other practices, however, lawyers do not have that opportunity.

Peer Support

Brewin et al (2000) conducted a study on the risk factors of stress/mental health issue becoming worse over time.

The largest contributing factor was the lack of social support after the incident (over psychiatric history, childhood abuse, trauma severity, and additional stressors).

Talking with your colleagues and showing support for one another can prevent stress from becoming distress, and prevent distress from becoming crisis.

Peer Support

Peer Support occurs when a lawyer shares their knowledge and experience, whether practical, emotional, or social, to help another lawyer.

Peer Support is a voluntary service, offered through Assist that can be used on its own or in conjunction with professional counselling.

Peer Support is confidential, within ethical and legal boundaries, in all situations. All interactions are discreet, confidential, and respectful.

Assist Resources

Assist has a number of resources, self-tests, and presentations on the topic of compassion fatigue.

Visit the Assist site by [clicking here](#) for more information, or call **1 877 737 5508**.

***Assist** is entirely responsible for the accuracy and validity of the information offered in this learning module.



The Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society (Assist)

Assist is a charitable society providing help to lawyers, law and articling students, and their families with personal issues.

Our goal is to prevent crisis and keep lawyers and law students happy and healthy.

Assist is governed by an independent Board of Directors. Confidentiality is the corner stone of our programs and services.

FREE CONFIDENTIAL SERVICES

Professional Counselling

Assist provides up to four hours of professional counselling to you and your family. This time is given to each family member, per issue, per year, so that problems can be assessed and referrals made to long-term sources of help, if necessary. Our counsellors are located across the province, and are available for emergencies.

Peer Support

This is a program of lawyers helping lawyers. The goal is to develop a relationship of trust and confidentiality with another lawyer who relates to your experiences, providing encouragement and hope.

Resources

Assist offers information on various topics such as Career & Education, Physical & Mental Health, Work-Life Balance, Stress Management, and Overcoming Addictions.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Peer Support Program

Join a network of support through lawyers helping lawyers. You will have the opportunity to provide one-on-one personal or career-related support. You will receive training outlining your responsibilities and required skills in offering peers help, encouragement, and referrals to appropriate resources.

Committees

Assist is supported by working committees. You will be able to contribute your background and skills to any one of these committees, such as Communications, Funding, Succession Planning, Law Schools, and Peer Support.

Representatives

Assist speaks at workshops and events, publishes a quarterly on-line newsletter, offers a website with resources, and contributes to various publications. Your contribution is welcomed.

Contact Information

For immediate help call **1 877 498 6898** (toll free) from anywhere in Alberta.

For more information on **Assist's** services and to access our online resources, visit our website at:
www.albertalawyersassist.ca

To speak with someone at **Assist** about our services or volunteer opportunities, call **403 537 5508** or **1 877 737 5508**.



Peer Support Program

The Peer Support program matches a judge, lawyer or law student seeking help with a peer that understands the person or problem. Peer Support is a free and confidential program where a volunteer lawyer offers practical, emotional, and social support to a peer.

What is the Peer Support program?

- Peer Support occurs when someone shares their knowledge and experience, whether practical, emotional or social, to help another person.
- Peer Support is a voluntary service offered through Assist that can be used on its own or in conjunction with professional counselling services.
- Peer Support is confidential, within legal & ethical boundaries, in all situations.
- All interactions are discreet, confidential, and respectful.

What can I expect as a participant?

- After contacting Assist, you will be quickly matched with a Peer Support volunteer who has shared a similar experience or who can relate to you.
- Your Peer Support match will be available to talk, share resources, and attend support meetings with you.
- You can shape the Peer Support relationship based on your needs, while maintaining respect for personal boundaries (there is no minimum or maximum amount of interactions).
- A relationship of trust and confidentiality with someone who can relate to your experiences.
- experiences.

What can I expect as a volunteer?

- An opportunity to help lawyers who are in need of emotional, personal, or career-related support.
- Training outlining your responsibilities and developing skills as a Peer Support Volunteer.
- A chance to offer support, encouragement, and referral to appropriate resources.
- The ability to accept or decline peer support matches depending on your comfort level and previous experiences.
- A network of support through Assist's Peer Support program and Professional psychological services.

How do I get involved?

Participant: Call 403 537 5508 or toll free, 1 877 737 5508. We are here to listen and will arrange a Peer Support match.

Volunteer: Visit our website for an online application at www.albertalawyersassist.ca or call 403 537 5508 or toll free, 1 877 737 5508 to sign up for the next training session.