

Diocese of Derby  
Clergy Wellbeing Group

## **Compassion Fatigue – Recognise and Recover**

We recognise that your work with your church community can be both rewarding and fulfilling, while also drawing you into times of very real personal and social distress.

This is one of the papers on wellbeing that are available on this site which we hope will be helpful and become a valuable resource to share with others.

In this paper, you will find an outline of some of the causes of compassion fatigue, their symptoms and some remedies.

We know that compassion fatigue is as old as compassion itself! Compassion fatigue or emotional exhaustion in a caregiver is a condition that anyone in the helping professions and who work at the rock-face of human distress is at risk of developing, especially where a person has experienced traumatic events in their own childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood.

A significant part of a Priest's emotional work is with the bereaved, the anxious, and meeting the often-demanding needs of others. To keep exercising a gracious attitude, offering support, comfort, and even discipline can be emotionally draining to a clergy person who may need to exercise all of these and more within a single day, and over many weeks. Emotional or compassion fatigue in clergy is then, an ever-present possibility.

Colleagues or family may become aware sooner than the sufferer that they are becoming emotionally fatigued, for there is often an insidious onset with gradual escalation of symptoms which the sufferer does not always recognise, because of their immersion in the urgency of situations, and their physical and mental weariness.

### **Smoke and Mirrors**

Inside our brain structure, we have nerve cells called mirror neurons. These complex neurons are stimulated during contact with others, and link into our own experiences with the result that we sometimes 'mirror' the other in our physical responses and in our emotions.

Someone yawns, and though we don't feel tired, we find ourselves yawning too. A person is laughing, and although we don't know what is funny, we find ourselves laughing too, while to be with someone deeply distressed may trigger similar feelings in the listener. These examples show how mirror neurons can and do affect our behaviour and emotions.

When a helper is calm and provides a steadying presence, the troubled person's mirror neurons pick up the calmness, and a sense of quietening and steadiness is induced. It's as if the calmness is transferred or borrowed from the carer. *However*, the carer's nervous system picks up the distress signals in the other, and their own physical responses may be triggered causing an escalation in the carer's stress levels.

### **Hormonal Influences**

Adrenalin and cortisol are hormones released into the blood system for heightened alertness and safe-keeping, and in life threatening situations, for survival. These hormones support our primitive and essential Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Submit responses. Small amounts of these hormones give a pleasurable feeling of excitement, raised energy levels, and heightened focus – the 'adrenalin rush' - one reason why scary fair rides and horror films are so popular!

However, when these hormones are kept in the body at high levels for prolonged periods of time, stress reactions escalate. What was initially supportive of wellbeing, becomes harmful. It can take anything from a few minutes to many months for these hormones to be absorbed and for the body to re-regulate itself, depending on the circumstances of their initial release and the degree of continued stimulation and level of support.

### **Physical and mental effects of chronically raised stress:**

The blood pressure remains raised, blood sugar levels fluctuate, and digestive problems are frequent. Sleep patterns may be disturbed, while the immune system becomes weakened with the potential to suffer more frequent illnesses where recovery takes longer.

People may feel irritable or jumpy, uncharacteristically tearful, or tetchy, have poor mental focus, become forgetful, experience raised levels of anxiety and depression, and experience a hyper-alert, or sluggish state of mind. There may be an increase in risk-taking, particularly when driving or alcohol use, and some may notice that they are uncharacteristically acting out of character, which can arouse feelings of anxiety and shame.

### **External causes of compassion fatigue.**

- Stressful relationships at home.
- Stressful and unsupported working environment.
- Frequent contact with people in chronic or acute crisis.
- Few healthy relationships outside the parish.
- Working in emotionally demanding situations that cannot be resolved.
- Disproportionate amounts of time working/supporting those who have suffered trauma or loss (emotional or physical).
- Obstructive behaviour, complaining, no appreciation or valuing by others.
- Poor protection and maintenance of personal boundaries from intrusion
- Poor self-discipline with unhealthy diet and little regular exercise.
- A harmful 'mental diet' of watching films/videos, computer games, that glorify violence. (Creates indifference to suffering in self and others).



### **Spiritual symptoms of compassion fatigue**

- Relationship with God collapsed.
- God seems absent, and faith may seem null and void
- Little interest in prayer or Bible reading.
- Wish to avoid friends and family or colleagues or sharing faith.
- Thoughts of giving up the ministry.



### **Physical and mental symptoms**

- Diminished self-care.
- Allowing personal boundary violations.
- Constant thinking about an incident or individual (Ruminating/obsessing).
- 'Flashbacks' to own traumas or scenes others have described.
- Indifferent to the distress and trauma of others with little empathy for self.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Disturbed sleep patterns.
- Losing a sense of oneself now or hope of a future.
- Feeling hopeless about life generally. Dispirited and cynical.
- Feeling overwhelmed by work demands.
- Thoughts of self harm/suicide.
- Dread hearing the phone, mobile and email alerts. Fear of opening emails.
- Marked weight gain or loss. Undisciplined eating, avoiding or excessive exercise.
- Prone to increased drinking alcohol, smoking, sweet and/or fatty foods.
- Risk-taking - driving dangerously, unsafe sexual activities.
- Increase of colds and flu, minor illnesses taking longer to recover.
- Hard to keep an emotional balance. Emotionally 'all over the place'

### **First Aid**

Pay quiet and respectful attention to yourself. What *is* going on inside right now in your mind? In your body? Respond aloud or whisper what you notice quietly to yourself. When we hear ourselves aloud, we connect more deeply to ourselves.

Becoming self-aware and assessing the degree of stress are vital first steps. Listen to what your spirit, your body, your mind, your mood, and your friends are all saying to you. Seriously question the belief that you are the only one who can help/knows what to do in this situation and have the courage to ask trusted others for feedback, support, advice, and prayer.

### **A mini oasis.**

Creating mini oases provide a significant resource until we have time to step back into a time for recovery.

- *Withdraw* from the source of stress.
- *Sit* somewhere quiet. In your car if necessary. Turn off the engine, radio and mobile. Even a toilet can become a private place to shut the world out!



- *Stop* everything for 5-10 minutes, or more.
- *Focus* on the fine details of something nearby.
- *Steady* and regulate your breathing. 3 breaths in, 5 out a few times, then 5 breaths in and 7 out. Quietly notice how your breath comes and goes all by itself.
- *Hug* yourself with a gentle and encouraging smile.
- *Hold yourself* with one hand on your heart and the other on your tummy.
- *Go for a very brisk walk* for 10-20 minutes.
- *Listen* to any birdsong you can hear or calming music.
- *Comb or brush* your hair. If you can, brush your teeth.

*Remember that You are OK, it's your stress levels that need regulating, and that if we do not care for ourselves, we cannot safely and efficiently care for others.*

### **More Practical self-help tips**

- Remember, this situation won't go on for ever "and it came-to pass"
- Re-establish personal boundaries – take *all* your day off, make more rest breaks. Organise others to cover your times off.
- Where possible leave the parish on days off. Put 'out of office' message on phone and email on days off and holidays. Publish your days off in parish notices.
- Rest and where possible, withdraw and limit the sources of stress.
- *Daily* exercise for at least 20 mins. Brisk walking, cycling, jogging, etc.
- Return to a healthy and disciplined diet, avoid sugary and fatty foods and excess alcohol.
- *Allow yourself* to take catnaps during the day if tired.
- *Look at photos (on mobile/laptop) that remind you of good people and events.*
- Read a calming/favourite prayer, Bible passage or poem. Have an online resource easily available. Find a good novel to read in spare moments.
- Listen to calming music, singing, a hymn etc.
- Spend time in silence with a candle or icon, and lean into the presence of God who knows and understands.
- Visualise a calm scene. (Mountains, rivers, beaches etc)
- Visualise and plan for a less stressed future – smile as you imagine a good day ahead. "Today is going to be a good day"! (Capt. Sir. Tom Moore 2021)

### **Physical self-support:**

- *Stand tall*, pulling up from the crown of your head, eyes and chin level. Feel the weight of your body and your balance through your feet and legs.
- If you find yourself keeping physically still and breathing shallowly (freeze response) *move*. Wiggle your toes, gently move your feet and take movement through your legs into your body right to the top of your head.
- *Stretch* out and flex fingers, arms, and shoulders. Pull your shoulders back and down and notice the difference these movements make.
- *Notice* your breathing pattern. Use the 3/5 then 5/7 pattern to calm yourself.
- *Focus* on the fine details of something nearby. Look closely for shades of light and dark, density and weight, hard and soft details. If this was a silhouette, how would it look? Notice what happens in your body as you concentrate on these details.

- Need exercise but don't have time? Open the window wide, and while looking to the middle-distance walk, jog, or dance vigorously in the space available until you breathe deeply and your heart beats hard. Do a few stretches, 'shake off' tension from your body.
- *Comb or brush your hair*, and if convenient, brush your teeth.

### **Emotional support:**

- *Name* and welcome that emotion. Don't change anything, simply notice how your *body* feels as you experience this emotion. Rigid body? Tight jaw or stomach? Clenched fists? Simply notice without judging or criticising.
- *Acknowledge* the emotions "I feel despair", "I feel sad", "I feel frustrated".
- *Draw an image of* your feeling/emotion with a finger on the palm of your hand perhaps with an emoticon.

Our emotions are God given for our stability and well-being. See them as messengers alerting us to what is happening internally. We cannot have a 'bad' or 'wrong' emotion, so take care to listen to the message, rather than shoot the messenger through harsh self-criticism!

### **"We are here to help each other walk the mile and share the load..."**



- *Increase* contact with supportive friends and family: ask for their prayers.
- *Tell them* that you are feeling vulnerable.
- *Reach out* for help from a trusted senior clergy person.
- *Keep a daily journal* or diary and off load thoughts feelings and reflections.
- *Avoid* taking on further demanding work/relationships.
- *Practice* mindfulness *regularly* to keep mind and body regulated and increase self-awareness. (Erratic mindfulness practice is unhelpful as it immunises against the value of this practice).
- *Request supportive counselling*. (Free to clergy and their close family members in Derby Diocese. See end of this paper for resources).
- *Arrange a retreat* and request additional time away from the parish.
- *Consult with GP*.
- *Arrange more time* with your spiritual director and parish supervisor.

We are all vulnerable and have built-in limitations - for our own good. Frequently others see our vulnerabilities and failures sooner than we do ourselves. There is a lot of help and support available for you, and you do not have to go it alone. Be courageous and ask for help, even though for some people, this may take considerable courage and grace.

Not all the symptoms listed above will indicate compassion fatigue. However, when several of these are experienced in combination, evaluate carefully and with

others. These symptoms may be calling your attention towards a change in your lifestyle, so that you too do not become a casualty to compassion fatigue.

We thank God for your dedication, and willingness to help others in distress, and for the pastoral skills that you have developed. Our hope is that you will find this paper helpful in recognising rising stress and managing yourself well when this occurs.

## **Clergy Wellbeing Resources**

### **Website:**

Likely to be where you found this! Lots of other helpful resources, signposts and contact details for a number of people with whom you could have an initial conversation.

### **Counselling:**

8 free sessions for clergy and their close family including children. A completely confidential service. contact:

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(Diocesan Clergy Counselling Service Coordinator)

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### **Pastoral Supervision:**

See Diocesan website/Clergy wellbeing page, or Rev. Chrissie Wood

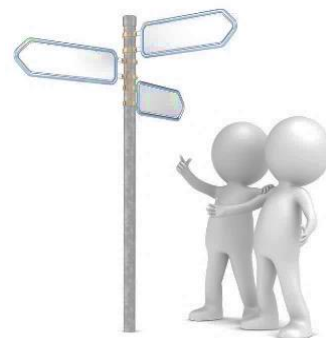
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