

Caring Without Carrying It All:

Compassion Fatigue in Child Welfare Work

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Outline For Today

1. The Emotional Reality of Child Welfare Work
2. What Compassion Fatigue Is
3. Signs and Impacts
4. Protective Factors and Strategies
5. Practical Tools for Sustaining Yourself in the Work



Learning Objectives

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Understand what compassion fatigue is and why it occurs in child welfare work
- Recognize common signs and early warning signals
- Reflect on how compassion fatigue may affect their own work and wellbeing
- Identify practical strategies that support resilience and sustainability

The Emotional Reality of Child Welfare Work

Professionals and volunteers in child welfare systems often:

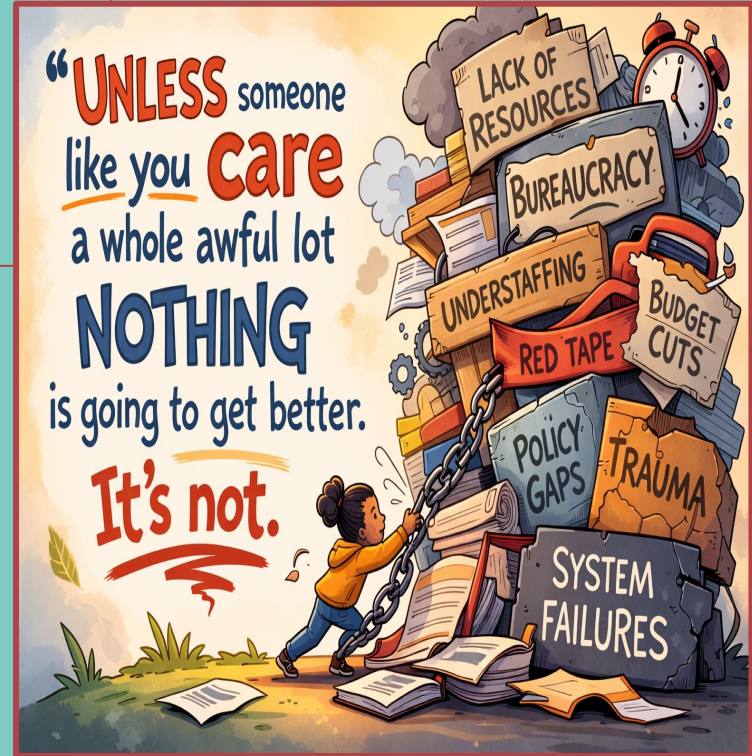
- Hear repeated stories of trauma, neglect, and adversity
- Work with complex family situations that may take months or years to resolve
- Navigate systems where outcomes are uncertain and decisions are shared across agencies and courts
- Encounter systemic barriers such as limited resources, heavy caseloads, and bureaucratic processes

Emotional Demands Accumulate

This work requires deep empathy and persistence. Over time, the emotional demands of supporting children and families through difficult circumstances can accumulate.



Compassion fatigue is *not* a failure of empathy. It is often the cost of caring deeply in difficult systems.



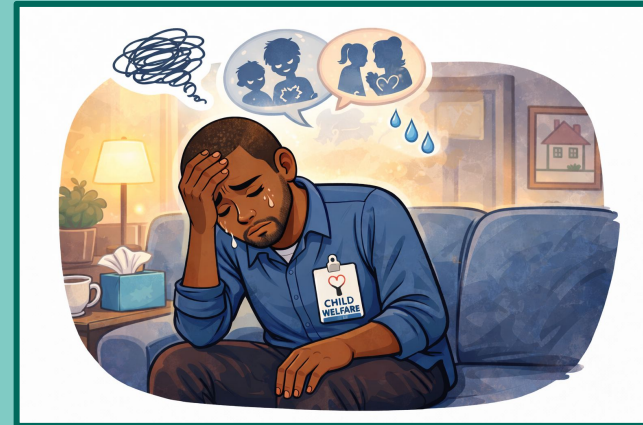
What Is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue describes the emotional and physical toll that can develop through sustained engagement with the suffering and trauma of others.

It may look like:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Reduced capacity for empathy or connection
- Feeling overwhelmed, detached, or discouraged
- Difficulty separating the work from the rest of your life

It develops through exposure because you care.



Related Concepts

BURNOUT

Stress related primarily to workload, demands, resources, and the work environment.

SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS (STS)

Trauma-related stress symptoms that can develop through indirect exposure to another person's trauma.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

A broader term commonly used to describe the emotional and physical toll of sustained empathic engagement with suffering.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Changes that can develop over time in how we view ourselves, others, safety, trust, and the world through repeated trauma exposure.

These experiences can overlap; we may experience more than one at the same time.

Why Does The Difference Matter?

Because different problems may require different responses.

If I'm experiencing...

I may need to look at...

Burnout

workload, resources, expectations, autonomy, organizational support

Secondary Traumatic Stress

trauma exposure, grounding, processing, supervision, professional support

Vicarious Trauma

cumulative exposure, beliefs, meaning, connection, deeper reflective work

Compassion Fatigue

overall balance of demands, emotional exposure, boundaries, support, and recovery

Self-care matters—but individual self-care cannot fix every systemic problem.

Professional Quality of Life

Helping work can have both enriching and difficult effects.

Compassion Satisfaction

What the work gives back

meaning • fulfillment •
sense of contribution

Burnout

The toll of ongoing work
demands

exhaustion • frustration •
feeling ineffective

Secondary Traumatic Stress

The impact of indirect trauma
exposure

intrusion • avoidance •
heightened stress

Compassion fatigue is a broader term often used to describe the cumulative toll of sustained empathic engagement with others' suffering. The ProQOL helps us look more specifically at burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion satisfaction.

Why Are People in Child Welfare Particularly Vulnerable?

Work in child welfare often includes:

- Exposure to trauma narratives and difficult life circumstances
- High emotional investment in children's safety and wellbeing
- Limited control over final decisions or case outcomes
- Long-term involvement with complex family systems
- Pressure to advocate effectively within constrained systems

What Might Compassion Fatigue Look Like?

- Irritability, frustration, or cynicism
- Emotional numbness or detachment
- Feeling helpless or ineffective
- Headaches, fatigue, or changes in sleep
- Increased need to escape or distract
 - Mindless scrolling
 - Increased alcohol, nicotine, or other substance use



Additional Warning Signs

Emotional

- Reduced empathy
- Feeling overwhelmed

Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating
- Persistent worry about cases

Behavioral

- Withdrawal from colleagues or loved ones
- Avoidance of certain cases or situations

Recognizing changes early gives us more options for responding.

Check In With Yourself: Professional Quality of Life

Scan to complete the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL 5)

Take a few minutes to complete it privately. Answer based on how frequently you experienced each item during the past 30 days.

Your responses are for your own reflection—you will not be asked to share your score.

<https://psytests.org/work/proqolen-run.html> 



<https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/home/self-care-kit/compassion-satisfaction-and-fatigue-stamm-2009.pdf> - fillable website version

Understanding Your ProQOL 5 Scores

Scale	Lower	Moderate	Higher
Compassion Satisfaction	≤ 22	23–41	≥ 42
Burnout	≤ 22	23–41	≥ 42
Secondary Traumatic Stress	≤ 22	23–41	≥ 42

Sustaining Yourself in the Work

Four Protective Areas

1. Self-Awareness

Notice

2. Support & Reflective Practice

Process

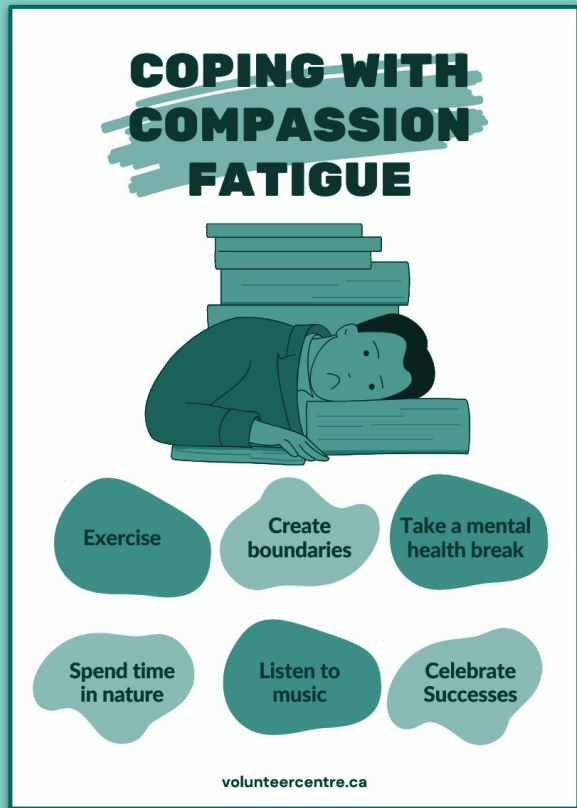
3. Healthy Emotional Boundaries

Contain

4. Consistent Self-Care

Recover

Notice → Process → Contain → Recover



1. Self-Awareness



NOTICE

What is happening in me?

Self-Awareness

You can't address what you don't notice.

Without awareness:

- Stress can accumulate unnoticed
- Reactions begin to feel automatic
- Changes may become our “new normal”

With awareness:

- We recognize when something is shifting
- We create space between feeling and reacting
- Earlier intervention becomes possible

Practice Self-Awareness

CHECK IN

What am I feeling physically, emotionally, and mentally?

NOTICE

What's different from my usual baseline?

NAME

What am I carrying from this work?

REFLECT

Am I carrying more than is mine to hold?

Notice without immediately trying to fix.

Meet Jordan

Jordan is a CASA volunteer assigned to a young child who has experienced significant neglect.

After visits, Jordan finds themselves thinking about the child late into the evening—wondering whether the child is safe and replaying conversations.

Over time, Jordan begins having difficulty sleeping and feels emotionally drained even on days without visits.

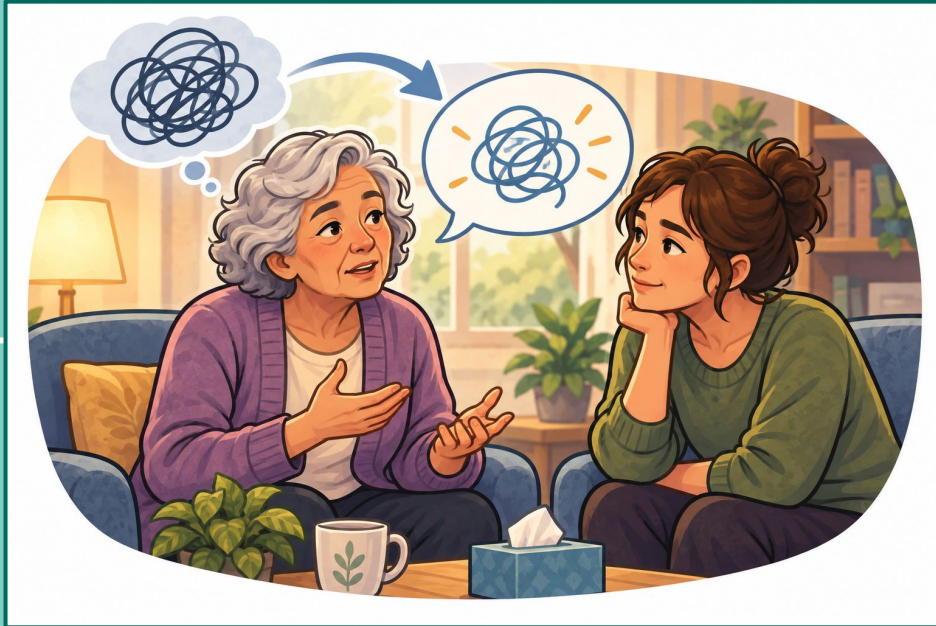
What do you notice?

What might help Jordan?

- Recognize the pattern early
- Use a transition ritual after visits
- Practice mentally “setting down” the case
- Clarify what is—and isn't—within Jordan's control
- Bring concerns into supervision or peer support

“I care deeply, but I am not responsible for controlling the outcome.”

2. Support & Reflective Practice



PROCESS

*Where can this go besides
staying inside me?*

Why Support Matters

What is shared can be processed. What is held alone often builds.

Without support:

- Stress becomes internalized
- Perspective can narrow
- Isolation increases

With support:

- We gain perspective
- Our reactions can be normalized
- Emotional load becomes more manageable
- We reconnect with the larger picture

Reflective Support vs. Case Processing

Are We Discussing the Case—or Processing Its Impact?

- **CASE-FOCUSED**

- What happened?
- What needs to happen next?
- What are the risks?
- Who needs to do what?

- **REFLECTIVE**

- What did this bring up in me?
- What am I having trouble letting go of?
- Where am I feeling stuck?
- What am I taking responsibility for?
- What support do I need?

We often have plenty of case consultation and very little reflective consultation.

Meet Alex

Alex is a child welfare caseworker managing multiple complex cases.

Court delays, limited resources, and inconsistent family engagement repeatedly interfere with progress.

Lately, Alex has become increasingly frustrated and irritable and finds themselves thinking:

“Nothing I do is making a difference.”

What do you notice?

What Might Help Alex

What might help?

- Reflective supervision or consultation
- Separate what Alex can influence from what Alex cannot control
- Identify meaningful progress that may be getting overlooked
- Reassess workload, expectations, and available resources
- Connect with colleagues who understand the work

Not every problem can be solved through individual coping.

3. Healthy Emotional Boundaries



CONTAIN

What is actually mine to carry?

Why Boundaries Matter

Without clear emotional boundaries, we may begin to:

- Over-identify with a child or family
- Feel responsible for outcomes we cannot control
- Carry cases beyond the limits of our role
- Confuse helping with rescuing
- Remain emotionally “on duty” after the work has ended

Boundaries make compassion more sustainable.

Emotional Boundaries

Emotional boundaries are the mental limits that define where your psychological space ends and another person's begins, allowing you to take ownership of your feelings while respecting others' autonomy.



What Is A Healthy Emotional Boundary?

A Healthy Emotional Boundary Allows Me To...

CARE

without absorbing

SUPPORT

without rescuing

ADVOCATE

without controlling

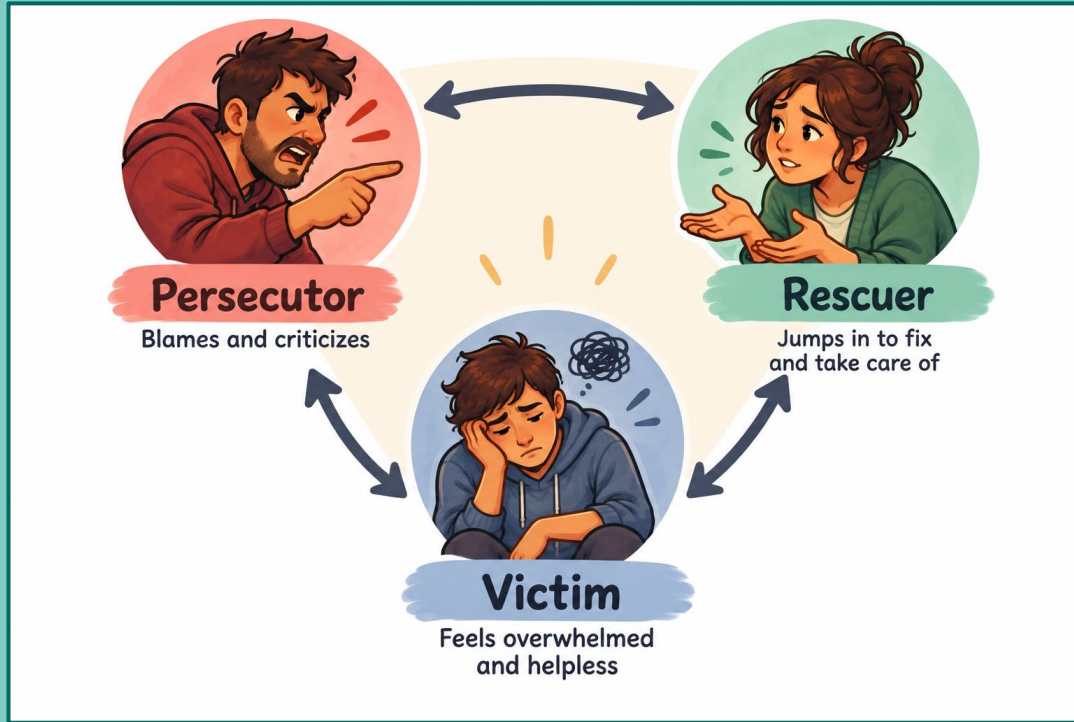
STAY PRESENT

without carrying everything home

Connected $\neq$ responsible for everything



Karpman Drama Triangle: When Helping Becomes Rescuing



What happens when I believe I have to fix this?

Internal Boundary Practices

Practicing Internal Boundaries

Ask yourself:

What is within my role?

What can I influence—but not control?

What belongs to someone else?

What am I carrying that I need to set down?

Care deeply. Hold appropriately.

Control

I can control:

- Choices I make
- My response
- Where I direct my energy
- My opinions
- Asking for help
- Learning from mistakes
- My words
- My attitude
- My beliefs
- My actions
- My effort
- Taking care of myself

I cannot control:

- Other people's opinions
- What other people think
- If others forgive me
- How others react
- Other people's mistakes
- World events
- Other people's decisions
- The past
- Other people's beliefs
- What other people say
- What other people do
- How other people feel

Internal Boundary Practices

- **Define What Is Yours vs. Theirs**
 - Remind yourself, “I am responsible for supporting and advocating, not for fixing or controlling the outcome.”
- **Limit Emotion Over-Identification**
 - Notice when you’re carrying a client’s pain home with you and gently set it down
 - Container exercise
- **Time Boundaries**
 - Give yourself permission to stop case-related calls/emails after work hours (except for emergencies).
- **Avoid “Rescuer Mode”**
 - When you find yourself trying to do more than your role allows, step back and reflect.
- **Emotional Pause Button**
 - If a conversation feels overwhelming, allow yourself to take a breath, ground yourself, or take a short break before continuing.

Additional Emotional Boundary Practices

- **Choose How To Disclose Personally**
 - Share warmth and empathy without oversharing your own struggles which can blur roles.
- **Say No When Necessary**
 - If taking another case or responsibility would compromise your wellbeing, advocate for your limits.
- **Mental Transition Rituals**
 - Do something symbolic at the end of the day to separate work from personal life
 - I.e. change clothes, take a short walk, have a symbolic touch point or ritual to leave work in its physical space

Healthy boundaries help sustain long-term involvement in child welfare work.

Setting Down What Isn't Yours To Carry



The Container Exercise

A brief meditation to support emotional boundaries

1 Notice

Take a slow breath and notice what you're carrying right now.



2 Visualize

Imagine a container in front of you — a box, basket, or jar that feels safe and strong.



3 Place

Gently place what is not yours to carry into the container. You can also place it there for now if you're not ready to let it go.



4 Close

See the container close. Know that it is safe, secure, and can hold this for now.



5 Return

Take a deep breath. Feel the ease in your body. You can come back to this container anytime you need to.



*“I care deeply, and I don’t
carry everything.”*

4. Self-Care



RECOVER

How do I restore what this work uses?

Self-Care is About Restoration

This work can use:

Attention

Emotional energy

Patience

Empathy

Physical energy

Capacity for connection

Recovery helps replenish what the work depletes.

You cannot continuously give from a system that isn't being replenished.

Coping vs. Restoration

COPING

Helps me get through the moment

- Distraction
- Comfort
- Escape
- Temporary relief

RESTORATION

Helps replenish something that has been depleted

- Energy
- Connection
- Calm
- Meaning
- Capacity

Both can have a place. They don't always do the same job.

Build Your Recovery Menu

Physical

What helps my body recover?

Emotional

What helps me process or regulate?

Social

Who helps me feel connected?

Reflective/Meaning

What reconnects me with perspective or purpose?

Choose what restores you—not what you think “should” restore you.

Meet Taylor

Taylor is an attorney who regularly hears detailed accounts of abuse and trauma.

Over time, Taylor notices feeling less emotionally affected by cases that once would have stayed with them.

That detachment has also begun showing up outside of work.

What do you notice?

What Might Help Taylor?

- Notice detachment without judging it
- Reconnect with body-based cues and emotions
- Create intentional transitions out of the workday
- Prioritize relationships and activities that restore connection
- Seek consultation or professional support if detachment persists or spreads

Recovery includes reconnecting with parts of ourselves the work asks us to set aside.

Strengthening Compassion Satisfaction

Recovery isn't only about reducing what drains us.

It also means noticing what sustains us:

- Meaning
- Connection
- Contribution
- Progress
- Purpose



Despite the challenges, many people find deep meaning in child welfare work.
What reminds you that this work matters?

Putting It All Together

Sustaining Yourself in the Work

NOTICE

What is happening in me?



PROCESS

Where can this go besides staying inside me?



CONTAIN

What is actually mine to carry?



RECOVER

How do I restore what this work uses?



These practices work together.

One Small Shift

Based on what you noticed today...

What is one thing you want to do differently?

Maybe I want to:

Notice something sooner

Process something with someone

Contain something I'm carrying

Recover something that's depleted

Make it small enough to actually do.



Final Thoughts

Being affected by difficult work does not mean you are ineffective at it.

Awareness gives us options.

Support gives the work somewhere to go.

Boundaries help us care without carrying everything.

Recovery helps restore our capacity.

Sustaining yourself is part of sustaining the work.



Take This With You



NOTICE

*What is happening
in me?*



PROCESS

*Where can this go
besides staying
inside me?*



CONTAIN

*What is actually
mine to carry?*



RECOVER

*How do I restore
what this work uses?*

— *I care deeply, and I don't carry everything.* —

Thank You!

Questions • Reflections • Discussion

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<https://www.verywellhealth.com>

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Tools & Resources

Link: [Self-Care Test](#)

Link: [Self-Care Assessment | Therapist Aid](#)

Link: [Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue \(ProQOL\) Version 5 \(2009\)](#)

Basic Self-Care Practices

Physical
Exercise, Sleep, Nutrition

Emotional
Journaling, Therapy, Mindfulness

Social
Time with friends/family, Support groups

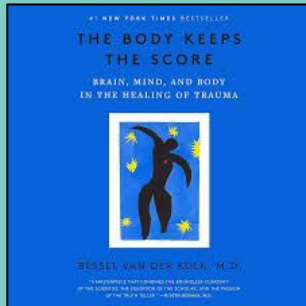
Cognitive
Reading, Learning, Creative hobbies

Spiritual
Meditation, Prayer, Nature connection

Recommended Reading

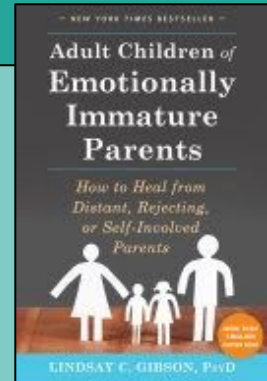
The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

by Bessel van der Kolk



Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents: How to Heal from Distant, Rejecting, or Self-Involved Parents

by Lindsay C. Gibson



Other Recommended Resources

On Burnout:

Video: [3 Essential Strategies for Managing Burnout for Modern Knowledge Workers](#)

Video: ER Doctor Teaches How to Overcome Burnout from a Body-Based Perspective with Dr. Laura Hays, MD

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNLVShxsV04>

On Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS):

[Window of Tolerance -An Essential Skill for PTSD, Trauma and Nervous System Regulation](#)

[Free Resources | STS Consortium](#)