

MEMBER RESOURCE

COMPASSION FATIGUE

When caring for everyone else empties the tank.

CODE ONE SUPPORT

COMPASSION FATIGUE

Compassion fatigue isn't burnout, even though the two get confused constantly. Burnout comes from the demands of the job. Compassion fatigue comes specifically from the caring part — and it can hit you even when your workload looks manageable on paper.

If you've noticed you don't feel much of anything anymore for the people you're helping — not even the mild sympathy you used to feel automatically — that's not you becoming a worse person. It's a specific, well-documented cost of repeated exposure to other people's suffering.

WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS

Every time you engage with someone in crisis, you're drawing on a finite emotional resource — the capacity to care, to be present, to hold someone else's pain alongside your own. Burnout depletes your general energy. Compassion fatigue depletes that specific resource, the caring itself, through repeated direct exposure to other people's worst moments.

It's sometimes called secondary traumatic stress, because in a real sense you're absorbing trauma at one remove — not experiencing the event yourself, but repeatedly witnessing and holding someone else's experience of it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

You're called to something that would normally get a genuine response from you — a family in crisis, someone at the worst moment of their life — and you notice you feel almost nothing. You do the job competently. You say the right things. But the part of you that used to actually feel it has gone quiet. Later you might feel guilty about that numbness, which is its own kind of weight on top of the original one.

HOW IT SHOWS UP

- Emotional numbness, particularly toward people you're meant to be helping
- Irritation or impatience with people in distress, where you'd previously felt sympathy
- A creeping cynicism about victims or the public generally
- Reduced capacity for empathy, even outside work — with your own family
- Feeling like you're just going through the script rather than actually present
- Guilt about the numbness itself, on top of everything else

WHY IT HITS THIS JOB HARDER

Most people who experience someone else's crisis do it once, rarely, and with time to recover. You do it as a matter of routine — sometimes multiple times in a single shift, for years. There's no equivalent job outside emergency services where caring for strangers in acute distress is simply the baseline expectation of a normal day.

There's also an asymmetry built into the role that most other caring professions don't have in the same intensity: you give continuously, in the worst moments, to people you'll likely never see again and who can't reciprocate anything. That one-directional giving, repeated constantly, is exactly the mechanism that produces compassion fatigue. It's not a flaw in how you're doing the job. It's what the job costs, structurally, if it isn't actively managed.

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS

Separate compassion fatigue from not caring. The numbness isn't proof you've stopped being a good person or a good responder. It's a signal that the specific resource you draw on to care has been overdrawn. Treating it as information rather than a character flaw is the first real step.

Actively refill outside of work. If the job draws down your capacity to care for strangers, it matters to deliberately spend time on connection that isn't depleting — people who care for you, not people you're caring for. This isn't optional self-indulgence. It's the input side of the same equation the job keeps drawing from.

Notice when the numbness starts leaking into your own relationships. Compassion fatigue at work is a known cost of the job. Compassion fatigue that's started showing up with your own family is a sign the tank isn't just low — it's not being refilled fast enough, and that's worth addressing directly rather than waiting for it to correct on its own.

Build in genuine breaks between exposures where you can. Even short deliberate pauses between difficult jobs — a few minutes to reset before the next call — give your capacity to care a chance to partially recover, rather than running continuously on the same depleted reserve all shift.

WORTH SITTING WITH

Is there a specific type of job or person where you've noticed your empathy has gone quiet?

Has the numbness started showing up at home, with people who aren't strangers?

What's currently refilling you, outside of work – and is it enough?

IF THIS IS URGENT RIGHT NOW

This resource isn't a crisis tool. If you're having thoughts of suicide, of not wanting to be here, or of harming yourself – stop reading and reach out now:

AU: Lifeline 13 11 14 **US:** 988 **UK:** Samaritans 116 123 **CA:** 1-833-456-4566

This resource will still be here when you're ready.

Rick – Founder, Code One Support

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MORE FROM CODE ONE SUPPORT

If this helped, here's where to go next.

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One practical mental health tool every week, written for first responders and their families.

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TikTok & Instagram: @codeonesupport · codeonesupport.com · info@codeonesupport.com

This resource is for informational and educational purposes only and does not replace professional mental health support. If you are in crisis, contact your local 24/7 crisis service.

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