

Couldn't Care Less: The Impact of Caring

How Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction are experienced by Hospice Palliative Care Providers

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Background

- Hospice Palliative Care (HPC) providers work in the context of ongoing exposure to distress, loss, grief and bereavement.
- Research has shown that this experience can contribute to caregiver suffering and impede the long term capacity of professionals and volunteers to provide end of life care to patients and their families.
- However, there has been little research that has explored the benefits of caring that sustain HPC providers in their work over time.
- The authors posit that the concepts of **compassion satisfaction** and **compassion fatigue** are useful constructs for understanding both positive and negative aspects of caring.

Methods

- As a prelude to a broader CIHR study titled *Who will care in the end: A pan-Canadian study of palliative care providers*, two **focus groups** comprised of HPC providers in BC and Ontario explored these concepts.
- Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who worked or volunteered with palliative patients and families in acute care and hospice settings.
- 13 participants participated in 2 focus groups
- Each focus group was audio-taped and met once for 1.5 hours; each group was facilitated by one or more of the authors.

Focus Group Participants

Nurses
Physicians
Social Workers
Physio Therapists
Music Therapists
Occupational Therapists
Volunteer Coordinator/Volunteers



Compassion fatigue comprises “natural, consequent behaviors and emotions” that result from empathic engagement with people in severe distress, and **compassion satisfaction** stems from the emotional rewards of that work (Figley, 1999).

Research Purpose

- To explore the understanding and experience of **compassion satisfaction** and **compassion fatigue** for HPC professionals and volunteers.

Findings

- Compassion fatigue** was a familiar term to most while **compassion satisfaction** was new to all.
- Some participants compared and distinguished **compassion fatigue** from **burnout**:
“For years there was burn-out and it’s a popular term and I never liked that because I felt like I wasn’t burning out but I was smoldering . . . which, I think, is more reflective of compassion fatigue.”
- Others spoke of **lack of depth and disconnection** in their engagement with patients and families:
“ . . . we can’t, at a certain level, walk in the room to walk with them’. We can be there, we can go there . . . but not be psychically present for the depth of work that they are ready to engage in.”
“So what I’m more able to tune into when there is compassion fatigue is that I feel disconnected from myself, like there is nobody home . . . I quickly sense that something is off, and I’m either feeling numb, or I’m too many emotions, but something, something feels off . . .”
- Some experienced **grief** as a major part of compassion fatigue, while others did not :
“I think for me that’s a big part of it . . . I’d say probably grief is a large part of my compassion fatigue – not all maybe, but for me it’s a big part of it, and it is that accumulation of grief.”
“ . . . I guess I feel sadness, but I do not feel grief and I do not experience an emotional burn-out from that experience. That is not what it is to me.”
- Compassion satisfaction** was connected to the **everyday experience of palliative care**:
“I think it’s more just satisfaction with being in palliative care . . . the magic of palliative care. That you take a patient with a difficult problem like pain or something else, or a difficult family, and you transfer them up from somewhere else, and magic happens – you know, pain is better, there’s wonderful things happening with the family, and it’s tremendously satisfying.”
- Some participants spoke about the **reciprocity and meaningfulness** of their work, and the **gifts** they receive from it, as significant sources of the satisfaction they experience:
“ . . . I’m guessing that’s why a lot of us are in this many years later because we get a huge amount back. Not only are you in a place of meaning every time you come to work, and what could be more wonderful than that. I mean these are not frivolous days . . . not only are you in a place of meaning but you are in a place where you really do feel . . . ‘I’ve made a substantial difference’.”
“Those things that we think are simple . . . the simple things like a nice cup of coffee on a sunny morning and knowing that some people cannot enjoy that . . . it’s the simple things that are really a reminder to me that those are the gifts of life.”

Next Steps

- The findings will be used to refine and validate measurement instruments specific to these concepts.
- Ultimately, this information will be used to develop strategies to address the adverse outcomes of **compassion fatigue** and build upon the positive attributes of **compassion satisfaction**.