The Courage Cartographer's

GUIDE TO NAVIGATING COMPASSION FATIGUE

Environmental Health Professionals

Special Edition

WELCOME

Welcome to the Navigating Compassion Fatigue Guide: Environmental Health Professionals Special Edition! Environmental Health professionals are often the quiet protectors working behind the scenes to safeguard the systems, spaces, and standards that keep communities safe. And, carrying the weight of others' well-being, especially in the face of resistance, underfunded programs, cutbacks, and chronic crisis, can take a toll.

This guide was created for EH leaders and teams in support of this incredible professional community. It offers a shared language, real insights from a diverse range of Environmental Health professionals, and practical systems-level strategies to help organizations recognize, replenish, and reinforce compassion in the workplace.

The goal of this guide is to bring awareness and understanding to what compassion fatigue is and looks like in this field, the toll it takes on the workforce, and to provide agencies with practical, research-backed strategies to address the hazards of compassion fatigue.

Thank you for all you do to protect our families, communities, and world.

Dr. Lucy Houghton

THE COURAGE CARTOGRAPHER™

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INTRODUCTION

Compassion fatigue is not just something that happens in hospitals or counseling centers. It shows up **anywhere people are asked to** care deeply, show up consistently, and **carry the emotional weight of their work**. Environmental Health professionals experience this in ways that often go unseen, yet the toll is real.

This guide was developed to help leaders in Environmental Health understand what compassion fatigue is, why it matters, and what can be done about it. It's built from research, best practices, and real conversations with EH professionals who are doing this work every day.

The goal is not to add more to your plate. The goal is to give you language, tools, and insights that help you create healthier systems, stronger teams, and a more sustainable path forward.

In this eBook you will learn...

- What compassion fatigue is and what it isn't
- Why it matters for both personal well-being and organizational success
- Insights into how compassion fatigue shows up in EH work
- Tools and resources to help you take the next step for your team and agency

Let's get started!

NOTE: While compassion fatigue is well-documented in healthcare and emergency response, environmental health is gravely understudied and underrepresented in peer-reviewed literature. The research cited in this guide is based on data from related fields.

No content on this guide should ever be considered medical advice or used as a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or other qualified clinician.

QUICK HISTORY

Compassion fatigue is often confused with burnout, stress, or depression. And while it can exist at the same time and complicate these issues, it has a distinct origin and impact, and understanding that difference matters, especially for those leading teams who do emotionally demanding work.

The term "compassion fatigue" was **first introduced in 1992 by nurse Carla Joinson**. She used it to describe the unique form of emotional exhaustion she observed in caregivers, particularly those in emergency settings, who had lost their ability to nurture due to prolonged exposure to suffering (Joinson, 1992).

Dr. Charles Figley later expanded on this work, naming compassion fatigue as a form of secondary traumatic stress. He described it as a state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped, resulting in emotional exhaustion and reduced empathy (Figley, 1995).

Both Joinson and Figley made it clear: c**ompassion fatigue is a natural, human response to chronic emotional labor**. It is not a personal failing. It is not a sign of weakness. It is not the same as burnout , though it often overlaps and, left unattended, may lead to burnout.

DEFINING COMPASSION FATIGUE

What it is...

- Emotional and empathic exhaustion caused by sustained exposure to others' distress and suffering
- A wearing away of the empathetic capacity to connect and care over time
- A natural response to the inability to protect or heal other's suffering
- A result of compassion stress without adequate recovery & systemic support
- Often called secondary traumatic stress, second victim syndrome, and compassion stress

What it is not...

Post Traumatic Stress: PTS comes from direct trauma. Compassion fatigue results from prolonged exposure to others' suffering.

Depression: While it can mimic symptoms like exhaustion or withdrawal, compassion fatigue is rooted in the emotional demands of caregiving.

Moral injury: Moral injury happens when someone knows the right thing to do but cannot act due to external barriers. Compassion fatigue comes from the ongoing emotional strain of showing up for others who are suffering.

General burnout: Burnout stems from 6 main organizational drivers and is defined by three main characteristics. Compassion fatigue is more about emotional depletion from caring deeply over time.

Lack of Resilience: Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen said, "The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering... and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water without getting wet" (cited in Stoewen, 2019).
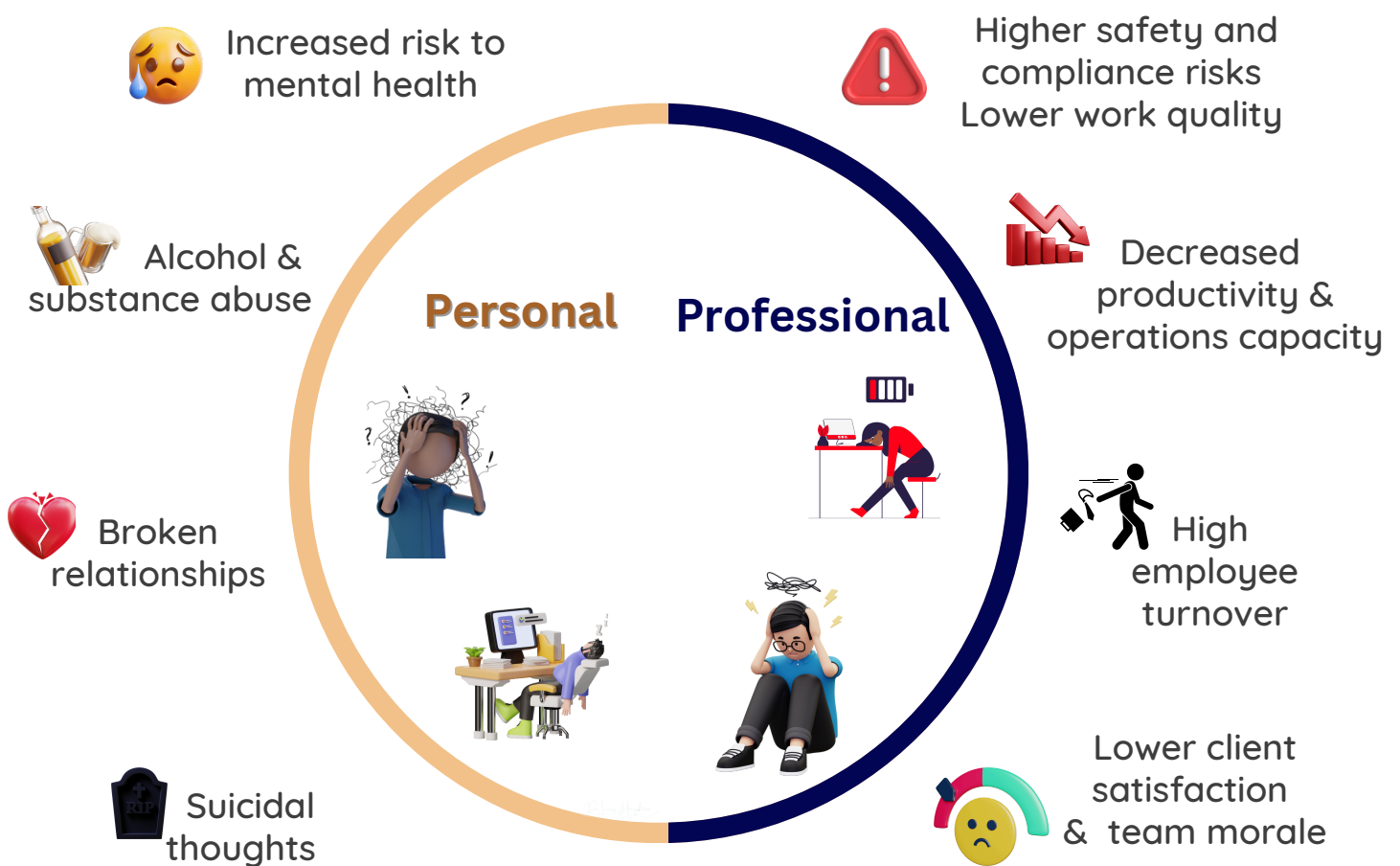
For more information on burnout or to receive the Guide to Overcoming Burnout, email support@lucyhoughton.com)

WHY WE CARE

Compassion fatigue can be harmful...
personally and professionally

Increased risk to mental health

Higher safety and compliance risks Lower work quality

Alcohol & substance abuse

Decreased productivity & operations capacity

Personal **Professional**

Broken relationships

High employee turnover

Suicidal thoughts

Lower client satisfaction & team morale

(Cocker, F., & Joss, N. 2016; Figley, 2002; Handran, J. 2013; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022; Swensen, S., & Shanafelt, T. , 2020)

CAUSES

The experience of compassion fatigue in Environmental Health is shaped by **repeated exposure to emotionally taxing moments**. These moments accumulate, especially when staff feel unsupported by systems to improve outcomes or unseen in their impact.

Environmental Health professionals shared the following lived experiences. Their words reflect the emotional cost of caring in high-pressure, high-accountability roles. When asked what is hard about your EH work, they shared:

- Bearing witness to loss and suffering, including the death of the most vulnerable
- Enforcing actions that unintentionally harm others, such as closing businesses
- Experiencing public resistance, misinformation, and verbal or physical abuse
- Repeatedly addressing violations with no sustained change
- Feeling unseen, unsupported, or misunderstood by leadership and the public
- Navigating emotionally charged conflict without recognition or backup
- Facing the pressure of being the messenger of hard truths
- Making decisions that protect public safety while carrying the emotional weight of economic fallout
- Working in systems that lack urgency, empathy, or enforcement
- Feeling discredited or dismissed when providing science-based recommendations
- Witnessing the harm caused when misinformation spreads more rapidly and widely than accurate guidance

These experiences are consistent with research on compassion fatigue, which describes the psychological cost of caring and the distress from extending compassion and empathy without replenishing (Figley, 2002; Stamm, 2010). Recognizing these lived realities **helps leaders understand** that **compassion fatigue is the result of work related activities** that require **built-in systems to replenish depleted compassion and empathy.**

WHERE TO START

Create structures that protect staff and reduce harm. Compassion fatigue is an **occupational hazard** with agency responsibility to build systems that minimize risk.

Consider two parallel goals:
1. Care for the people safeguarding our environmental health
2. Strengthen the agency alignment to reinforce support

Recognize the Cost of Caring

Compassion fatigue arises from prolonged exposure to the suffering of others, leading to emotional exhaustion and decreased empathy. It is predictable and measurable .

Replenish What's Drained

Build in individual wellbeing and compassion support.
Make space for recovery, reflection, and the emotional labor this work requires.

Reinforce With Systems

Take time to **assess culture** and **systems misalignment.**
Create team-level protection against compassion fatigue.

Recognize

Make it safe and accessible for teams to check-in

Compassion fatigue cannot be addressed if we do not know it's there. Consider creating space for your team to safely check in on how they're doing. Normalizing check-ins can increase team comfort. Ensure employees have direct access to your agency's Employee Assistance Program and crisis support lines.

Consider

- Normalize emotional check-ins
- Normalize seeking support early and as often as needed.
- Train supervisors to recognize signs of emotional depletion.
- Offer optional, confidential, standardized assessments as a non-diagnostic tool.
- Be clear that compassion fatigue is a natural human response.
- Remember to lead by example

Recommended Tools

Professional Quality of Life 5.0 Test

Most commonly used test for measuring compassion fatigue. Measures with three subscales: compassion satisfaction; risk of burnout and secondary traumatic stress.
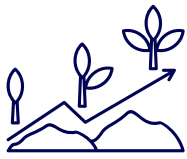
» LEARN MORE

Self-Compassion Test

Measures an individual's level of self-compassion. It assesses how people treat themselves in times of failure, suffering, or personal difficulty.

» LEARN MORE

Replenish

Make research-backed restorative activities accessible

Compassion fatigue occurs when emotional resources are drained faster than they can be restored. Here are replenishment activities grounded in research that help refill our compassion and empathy.

◇ ◇ ◇

Research-Backed Practices That Help

Trusted Peer Connection: Informal debriefs with trusted colleagues reduce isolation and restore empathy. [8]

Take breaks: Micro-breaks and lunch away from your workstation improve emotional regulation and lower stress. [1, 9]

Spending time in nature: Even short doses of green space or natural light improve recovery from stress and emotional depletion. [4, 39]

Practice gratitude: Daily gratitude reflection increases resilience and positive affect in high-demand work environments. [12, 35]

Self-compassion: Profoundly reduces secondary trauma and increases compassion satisfaction. [34]

Exercise: Physical activity significantly reduces symptoms emotional fatigue and improves emotional resilience and enhances mood regulation. [47, 49]

Prayer and spiritual connection: Spiritual practices are shown to be buffers to compassion fatigue. [29, 38]

Therapy: Proven to reduce secondary traumatic stress, increase coping, and support long-term emotional health. [24]

Music, Art, Reading: Creative leisure restores attention and helps downregulate the nervous system. [46]

Animals: Human-animal connection reduces stress and increases emotional wellbeing, including watching animal videos. [10, 11]

Reinforce
Address & update systems, policies, and practices to support staff

Compassion fatigue is an agency issue. Leaders can protect and support their teams by embedding emotional safety into systems, policies, and practices.

Research-Backed Practices That Help

Update policies: Recognizing compassion fatigue as a workplace risk. [24, 36]

Peer-to-peer programs: Structured peer support systems significantly reduce emotional exhaustion in high-stress roles. [32]

Ensure access to EAP and wellness resources: Proactive, visible support services correlate with lower turnover and improved well-being. [9, 26]

Offer Mental Health Leave: When recovery time includes emotional health, it signals that rest is a right and reduces long-term depletion. [5, 36]

Compassion training for leaders: Educating teams on the signs, impacts, and interventions of compassion fatigue reduces stigma and builds shared language for support. [2, 26, 45]

Recognition and responsiveness: Regularly recognizing staff contributions and actively listening to their concerns helps combat fatigue-related withdrawal. [28, 45]

Camaraderie and connection: Informal team building and community-focused events improve morale and help buffer against emotional disconnection. [9, 45]

Rotate staff out of high-stress tasks periodically: Job rotation in emotionally intense roles prevents cumulative overload and supports long-term sustainability. [22, 36]

Provide quiet rooms: Short breaks in low-stimulation environments help employees reset and return to work grounded. [33]

Mentorship / Buddy Program: Mentorship in emotionally taxing roles builds resilience, coping, and belonging. [31, 41]

TAKE ACTION

Which 1-3 agency actions are most important for us to consider right now?

Which action/s can we implement in the next 90 days?

Consider: Who needs to be involved? Who's voice and buy-in is essential?

(Impacted staff, under-represented staff, HR, employee health, executive leadership...?)

How will we measure progress?

What actions need to be taken?

Who is responsible for each action?

When will the actions be complete?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the incredible Environmental Health (EH) professionals who contributed their expertise and insights to this guide during the 2025 National Environmental Health Association's Annual Education Conference Pre-conference. Your invaluable input has shaped the tactics in this guide, ensuring they are tailored to the unique challenges and needs of EH professionals. This collaboration has made the guide more effective and relevant to enhancing wellbeing for all EH professionals. Thank you for your commitment to creating thriving work environments for all.

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