

too tired to care

Pippa Peppiatt looks at how we can prevent 'compassion fatigue'

Caregivers are often so busy caring for others that they tend to neglect their own emotional, physical and spiritual health. Studies confirm that caregivers play host to a high level of compassion fatigue.

The word compassion means 'together suffering', or empathy. In my experience, nurses tend to be good at listening carefully and reacting empathetically.

Yet herein lies a paradox at the heart of clinical practice: in order to be effective nurses, we need to have compassion, to enter imaginatively into our patient's suffering. But because of the pressures of the working environment, it's impossible to empathise with so many people, and too easily we get compassion fatigue.

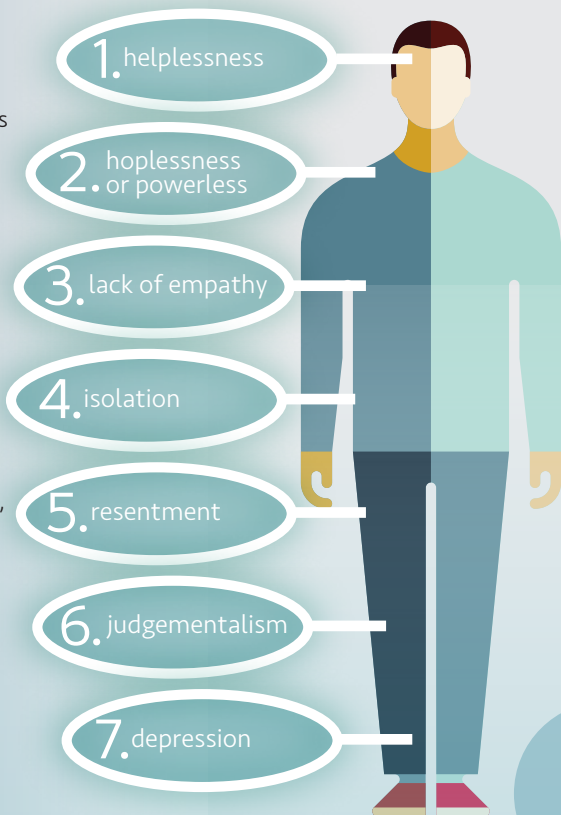
The systemic problems of the NHS mean it's hard to keep good standards of care,

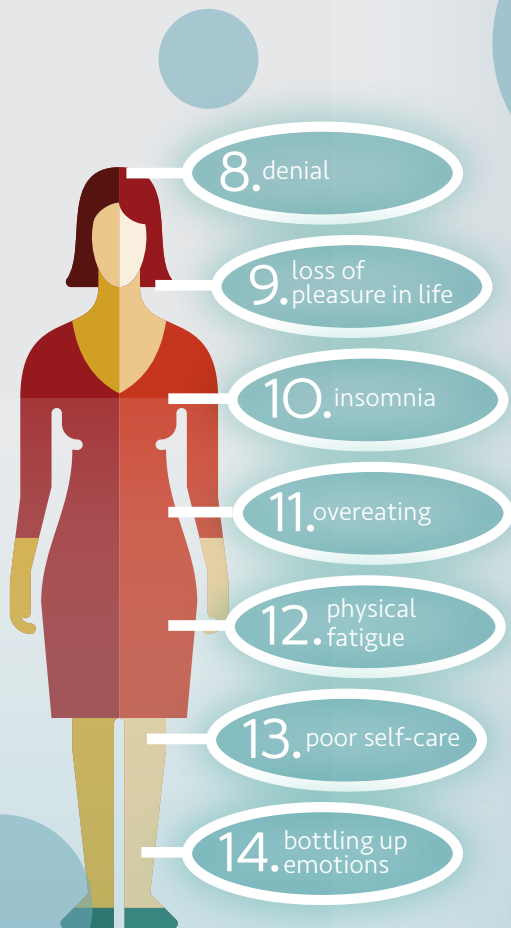
keep motivated and compassionate when poorly resourced and staffed.

Additionally, many nurses become too emotionally engaged, lack strong personal boundaries and have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. This type of personality works well for a period but quickly experiences burnout.

MRI scanners show that when a person sees someone else suffering in pain, the viewer's brain records the viewer also suffering. But this empathy decreases if viewing someone in pain from a different social group or if we think they've brought it on themselves to some extent. This is a challenge to caregivers to be aware that compassion may already be stretched for these two groups and may decrease all the more as we experience burnout. We may begin, albeit subconsciously, to make self judgments over who is more deserving of our compassion than others, with less sympathy given to those who we deem less deserving (eg. alcoholics, repeat self-harmers, stressed out banker). As burnout progresses we can become increasingly impatient, judgmental and eventually detached.

14 Symptoms of compassion fatigue:





So how do we combat compassion fatigue?

Working in a supportive environment with a good team helps, not least in knowing each other well and checking each other's well being. This isn't always found in the hospital or community work environment, although I do believe each of us can help be 'cultural architects' and model positive and supportive working relationships, helping change practice. Despite a tendency to withdraw at tough times, we need to stay plugged into relationships at work, at church, or supportive friends and groups like CMF, where there is a commonality of understanding and an opportunity to be listened to, prayed and cared for.

Having self-awareness and realising when our personal wellbeing is compromised is important. Be self-compassionate and build in time to replenish yourself whether that is in restorative relationships or energising activities.

As Christians carve out time to spend with the Lord and receive his resourcing and life giving Spirit. Jesus is the ultimate healer, restorer, and source of all compassion. 🌸