Module 10 Chapter 2: Worker Self-Care

Overview
Child welfare work can be challenging. Workers may experience inadequate resources to serve families, insufficient staff numbers to handle large case loads, high demands to complete and document case work, and long work hours.

Workers may face additional challenges in their personal lives as they try to balance meeting needs of families in the child welfare system, needs of their own families and themselves.

This chapter introduces the following topics to increase worker awareness of:
- Self-care as an essential aspect of well-being
- Potential self-care and well-being concerns
- Personal well-being ideas for you to explore.

What is Self-Care?
Self-care refers to health across all spectrums – cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Self-care is an awareness of self and environment – or social well-being.

Self-care is a continuous process – not a one-time occurrence. It’s different for everyone, and it is necessary for personal well-being. Self-care is your responsibility, and you need to be intentional about it.

Why is Self-Care Important?
This may seem like a rhetorical question. However, child welfare workers often forget or neglect to engage in cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual self-care because their work is typically crisis-focused, emotionally-complex and morally-challenging.

Most social workers are inclined to be empathetic, compassionate, supportive and helpful. These qualities that help workers do their jobs also place them in the direct path of experiencing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue.

How Does Self-Care Help?
According to research conducted by many groups, adequate self-care can increase job satisfaction and performance. The promotion of personal well-being can also improve your interactions with children and families, your peers and your personal relationships.

Why Do I Feel Stressed?
Some of the most common job-related stressors for child welfare workers include:
- Face-to-face contact with children who have, or are alleged to have, experienced abuse and neglect
- Child deaths or near-deaths
- Families with inadequate resources to parent, survive financially, or meet other basic needs
- Frustrated, fearful, or angry families
- Separating children from their families
- Preparing for and attending court hearings
- Internalized community responsibility for the safety and well-being of children and families
- Community misperceptions regarding the realities of child welfare
- Stressed co-workers and supervisors.

Without adequate self-care at work and at home, workers have a higher propensity to experience compassion fatigue and burnout. The next section heightens your awareness and understanding of these issues.

Compassion Fatigue
Dr. Charles Figley defines **compassion fatigue** as, “A more user-friendly term for secondary traumatic stress disorder...an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it is traumatizing for the helper.” (Figley, 2005).

**Secondary traumatic stress** (STS) simply means experiencing adverse emotional stress as a result of helping people who are directly experiencing trauma or are in harm’s way. Symptoms typically occur very suddenly or rapidly and can be very debilitating to a person’s overall functioning in multiple areas.

For child welfare workers, the empathy and compassion we have for, and give to, children and families in crisis can traumatize us – be emotionally toxic to us – if we don’t adequately care for ourselves. Symptoms of compassion fatigue, or secondary trauma, can manifest following exposure to even *one* traumatic event.

**Core Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue**
Sometimes we need more than a definition to help us identify experiences. Compassion fatigue is an emotional response to trauma; however, core symptoms may present themselves cognitively, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Cognitive symptoms may include:
- Inability to concentrate
- Recurring regret or guilt about your competency to perform your duties
- Consideration of finding other employment
- Continuing to think about aspects of your job when you are away from work.

Emotional symptoms may include:
- Anger
- Depression
- Loss of hope in humanity and the purpose of child welfare
- Decreased sense of humor
- Anxiety for your own children
- Irritability toward co-workers and your family members.
Physical symptoms may include:
- Inadequate sleep
- Continuous or extreme fatigue
- Migraine headaches
- Muscle pain not related to specific injury
- New, increased, or other drastic changes in the use of potentially unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol, tobacco or food.

Spiritual symptoms may include:
- Questioning or rejecting long-held spiritual beliefs
- Separating from previously important religious ideologies
- Questioning the purpose and importance of life.

Prevention Tips and Resources
You can adequately care for yourself and mitigate risks associated with experiencing compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress, and its symptoms by:
- Recognizing and accepting that you are ultimately responsible for your well-being.
- Committing to self-care and following through with your self-care plan.
- Ensuring adequate sleep, physical nourishment, mental rest, social interactions and spiritual care. Don’t bring your work home; when you are sick or on vacation, don’t allow work to interfere with your down time.
- Seeking support from peers, supervisors and other trained professionals to debrief traumatic work-related experiences.
- Taking time off when you need it.
- Monitoring your overtime hours.
- Giving thanks to families, peers, supervisors and other professionals; gratitude is part of respectful engagement and authenticity. And,
- Receiving appreciation from families, peers and supervisors. There are families who will thank you for helping them – accept and remember their gratitude. Supervisors, co-workers, judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem and other professionals will recognize your dedication and excellent work – receive and remember their compliments.

Burnout
Burnout is fatigue, frustration, or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork, or intense activity. The medical community defines burnout as exhaustion of physical or emotional strength usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.

Burnout occurs gradually and over time when people have prolonged exposure to trauma and stressors. It typically does not occur after a person experiences a traumatic event and it typically does not result in a loss of overall functioning.

Primary Differences
There are primary differences between compassion fatigue and burnout:
- Compassion fatigue symptoms occur after a traumatic event; burnout symptoms occur after prolonged exposure to trauma and stressors.
• Compassion fatigue involves rapid or sudden onset of symptoms; burnout symptoms occur more gradually and over time.
• Compassion fatigue often results in loss of overall functioning; burnout typically does not result in loss of overall functioning.

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<tr>
<th>Compassion Fatigue</th>
<th>Burnout</th>
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<tr>
<td>Traumatic event</td>
<td>Prolonged exposure to trauma and stressors</td>
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<td>Rapid or sudden onset of symptoms</td>
<td>Symptoms occur more gradually and over time</td>
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**Burnout Contributors and Outcomes**
Some child welfare workers experience high levels of stress, high case loads, and periods of intense interaction with families as ordinary occurrences.

Workers may also encounter other factors that contribute to burnout such as requirements for case timelines and documentation, ineffective supervision, complex family concerns, and inadequate resources to help families meet child safety and other needs.

Two common outcomes of burnout are poor service to children and families, and loss of experienced and talented workers in the field.

**Core Symptoms of Burnout**
The core symptoms of burnout may present themselves cognitively, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Cognitive symptoms may include:
• Reduced ability to effectively plan for child safety with families
• Reduced ability to identify child and family strengths
• Increased focus on child and family deficits
• Reduced ability to meet job demands.

Emotional symptoms may include:
• Continuous feelings of frustration and apathy
• Decreased desire to engage with families
• Decreased or loss of passion for child welfare issues
• Feelings of detachment and ineffectiveness
• Depression.

Physical symptoms may include:
• Physical exhaustion
• Difficulty sleeping
• HEADACHES AND MUSCLE ACHEs
• Lethargy
• Unhealthy changes in eating habits
• Increased use of caffeine, alcohol and tobacco.

Spiritual symptoms mirror those of compassion fatigue, such as:
• Questioning or rejecting long-held spiritual beliefs
• Separating from previously important religious ideologies
• Questioning the purpose and importance of life.

**Prevention Tips and Resources**
To adequately care for yourself and mitigate risks of burnout, utilize these tips and resources:
• Identify and meet your physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual needs;
• Engage in regular exercise;
• Pursue hobbies;
• Connect with yourself by finding time to be alone; and take time to connect with friends and family;
• Talk with your peers, supervisors or other trained professionals about stressful experiences with families;
• Take time off when you need it; and
• Identify what makes you laugh – pursue those things and find something to laugh about every day. You should not be the sole source of hilarity in your life – there are other things to laugh about besides yourself, even if there is so much material.

**Tools for Taking Action**
To begin engaging in and monitoring your personal well-being, go to the Attachments tab; locate, print, review and use the:
• Prevention, Self-Care and Healing Checklist
• Self-Care Action Plan.

These tools are for your personal use only. You may wish to file them in your binder and add items as you complete your foundation training. Make as many additional copies as you need; feel free to share blank copies or your personal plans with whomever you wish.

Your supervisor is likely to ask if you have printed the tools; and, he or she may also ask if you are using them. While it is important to discuss self-care with your supervisor during stressful circumstances, it is also important for you to remember that the tools are private. You do not have to share them with your supervisor or any other person if you don’t want to. The MCWTS has made note of the private nature of the tools in the Supervisor Pages; your supervisor should not ask to see them.

**Summary**
You are important. You deserve opportunities to take care of yourself while you care for others.

Be proactive and wise – take these suggested tips to heart and implement healthy self-care activities *now* to help prevent compassion fatigue and burnout.
Next Steps
Visit the Child Trauma Academy website. Dr. Bruce Perry’s on-line training, *The Cost of Caring: Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Impact of Working with High-Risk Children and Families* will help you learn more about this topic. ([http://childtraumaacademy.org/default.aspx](http://childtraumaacademy.org/default.aspx)) When you enter the website, click the CTA Training tab on the left navigation bar. Next, click CTA University and open *The Cost of Caring*. The course takes about 30 minutes to complete.

Visit the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project website at [http://www.compassionfatigue.org/](http://www.compassionfatigue.org/) for more information and suggestions to improve well-being.

Continue to build your training binder with documents and printouts from this chapter. From the Attachments tab, locate and print the chapter transcript. File it behind the Module 10 Transcript tab.

Remember to print and use the Checklist and Action Plan templates. File them in a place you can easily access as often as necessary.

Consult with your supervisor about critical incident de-briefing processes in your agency.

Take the Module 10 Post-Test and print your results.

Your next training will be Classroom Module 2: Family Assessment and Case Planning. When you complete classroom training, you may begin the next online module.