

# When Caring Takes A Toll

By Molly Ranns

It was 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. It had been a busy day. Snow was falling softly outside. Jolting me out of a rare state of quiet was the ringing of the helpline for the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP). I took a calming, deep breath and readied myself to offer whatever assistance the person on the other end of the line needed. The caller, it turned out, was an attorney seeking help for a most common concern—one I hear about regularly and yet, a trouble most don't recognize or acknowledge. The problem is one that arises *when caring takes a toll*.

The caller started out with hesitancy, as many do, unsure if the confidential nature of the program can be trusted (author's note: it can). After feeling more at ease, this person expressed uncertainty about the reason for contacting LJAP; it seemed the telephone number leapt out from the *Bar Journal*. The attorney had just won a big case, an important case, and was being celebrated by the firm, colleagues, family, and friends. The positive outcome validated many hours of hard work, but the caller described feeling exhausted, numb, and irritable and was experiencing headaches and having trouble sleeping.

The case, it turned out, involved abuse and neglect. The attorney had spent hours looking through photographs and hearing

testimony of distressing events. Those involved had struggles with mental illness and substance abuse. This case was just one in a sea of similar cases. Having to delve into clients' trauma had become routine.

The American Bar Association defines compassion fatigue as “the cumulative physical, emotional and psychological effect of exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity, combined with the strain and stress of everyday life.”<sup>1</sup> Some researchers refer to this as secondary trauma or vicarious trauma.<sup>2</sup> It seems our emotional demands can, in fact, outweigh our resources. While those in a helping capacity can be impacted by compassion fatigue, those with individual vulnerabilities—poor social support, poor self-care practices, difficulty controlling work stressors, or low job satisfaction—can be particularly affected.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas most research on compassion fatigue has been done with therapists, the impact this has on legal professionals is now being recognized, acknowledged, and explored. A State Bar of Wisconsin study examined the prevalence of compassion fatigue among state public defenders.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, it found that public defenders reported significantly higher rates of compassion fatigue than administrative staff, and higher rates than the general population. The higher the caseloads, the greater the impact of compassion fatigue.<sup>5</sup>

Does this sound at all familiar? How much is on your plate?

Speaking with Michigan lawyers through my work with LJAP, it seems that there are a number of unrealistic expectations placed upon attorneys that contribute to compassion fatigue. These expectations come from clients and fellow legal professionals. Clients are often distressed, sometimes with

their own struggles and mental-health issues. They may have unrealistic expectations about the outcome of their case, wanting results immediately and in a specific way. Stress mounts, and the difficulty of the cases or material being reviewed is not expected to result in an emotional response from the lawyer. Continued exposure to others' traumatic stories can result in

## Try This Tip From LJAP: Fact Check Your Negative Thoughts

Has 2021 begun differently than you expected? Many dreamed of closing the door on 2020 and starting fresh in the new year. This has been easier for some than others, especially with many of last year's stressors not yet fully resolved. Has ongoing stress impacted the way you think, feel, or even behave? Try this helpful tip from the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program—fact check!

When negative thoughts seem difficult to control, acknowledge that thoughts are not necessarily truths. Thoughts are not facts. While a thought such as “I failed the test” is factual in nature, “I'm not smart” is simply an opinion. This simple exercise can help us discern between thoughts that are truths and emotionally charged thoughts that are merely harmful opinions we have about ourselves. The next time negative thinking gets you down, take out a sheet of paper and write down your thoughts. Are they facts or just opinions?

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“Practicing Wellness” is a regular column of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, overseen by the State Bar of Michigan's Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program. If you'd like to contribute a guest column, please email [contactljap@michbar.org](mailto:contactljap@michbar.org).

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our own shattered assumptions about the world and a heightened awareness of vulnerability.<sup>6</sup> The assumption that the world is benevolent, for example, becomes altered. What happens when we do too much, for too long, with too few resources?

Oftentimes, our bodies tell us we're struggling with compassion fatigue long before our minds recognize or comprehend it. Physical indicators, much like the difficulties described by the aforementioned caller, can include exhaustion, difficulty sleeping, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, or even cold or flu-like symptoms.<sup>7</sup> Emotional symptoms of compassion fatigue could include depression, anxiety, irritability, guilt, or a sense of hopelessness.<sup>8</sup> If this sounds all too familiar, a simple self-assessment with exercises from Compassion Fatigue Solutions can help create awareness of how compassion fatigue may be impacting you and how you can better manage it.<sup>9</sup>

We know that compassion fatigue impacts everyone in a helping profession, and it affects some more than others. By caring for ourselves, we can reduce the negative impact of compassion fatigue. To avoid burnout—an advanced state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion related to the stresses of the job—work toward developing strong self-care strategies.<sup>10</sup> They may include:

- Asking yourself, what's on my plate? Is it too much? What contributes to it being too full and can I make small changes to reduce it?
- Creating time for yourself during the workday. This may be a 10-minute coffee break in the morning, a 30-minute walk at lunch, or an afternoon yoga session. Be creative!
- Learning to ask for help. Are there things at work you are willing to let go of or shift responsibility for that others with more time can handle?
- Identifying your vulnerabilities. Do you have a history of depression or anxiety or is your own trauma resurfacing? Are these difficulties contributing to compassion fatigue? Are you meeting these needs and caring for your own well-being?

- Learning to say no! Many of us in helping professions have a great deal of empathy. We care for others and want to help. Many times, we take on too much. It's okay to say no to others in order to say yes to yourself.

As always, if you or someone you know is struggling with the toll caring takes, contact the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program to learn about resources available to you. ■



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## ENDNOTES

1. *Compassion Fatigue*, Lawyer Assistance Programs, ABA <[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer\\_assistance/resources/compassion\\_fatigue/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/compassion_fatigue/)> [<https://perma.cc/5RZM-Q5XH>]. All websites cited in this article were accessed February 3, 2021.

2. Harr et al, *The Impact of Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction on Social Work Students*, 5 J Society for Social Work & Research 233 (2014), available at <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/676518>> [<https://perma.cc/48FB-K5GH>].
3. *Id.*
4. Molvig, *The Toll of Trauma*, Wisconsin Lawyer (2011), available at <<https://www.wisbar.org/newspublications/wisconsinlawyer/pages/article.aspx?volume=84&articleid=2356>> [<https://perma.cc/RKP2-85ST>].
5. *Id.*
6. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p 52.
7. Figley, ed, *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, 1995), p 12.
8. *Id.*
9. See the 2013 exercises authored by Francoise Mathieu available at <[http://vawforum-cwr.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/appendix\\_a\\_handouts1\\_0.pdf](http://vawforum-cwr.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/appendix_a_handouts1_0.pdf)> [<https://perma.cc/XP7T-UG6H>].
10. Chambers, *Judges and Compassion Fatigue: What Is It and What to Do About It*, The Missouri Bar, available at <[https://mobar.org/site/content/Articles/Well\\_Being/Judges\\_and\\_Compassion\\_Fatigue\\_What\\_Is\\_It\\_and\\_What\\_to\\_Do\\_About\\_It.aspx](https://mobar.org/site/content/Articles/Well_Being/Judges_and_Compassion_Fatigue_What_Is_It_and_What_to_Do_About_It.aspx)> [<https://perma.cc/DZG9-ZWKT>].

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