

When Helping Others Hurts You

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We all experience difficult times in life and often (thankfully) others have been there to support our time of need. Maybe you are one of those people who are always there for your friends, family and those you care about. Maybe some of you just naturally tend to be the “helping”, “caring” or “compassionate” type. If so, how do you determine when it is time to take care of yourself? How do you know when the problem of another is beyond your capacity or is draining you to the point of exhaustion? We all have limits to what we can handle emotionally.

Have you ever pushed yourself physically or mentally to the point of exhaustion? Well, the same thing goes for emotional energy. Like our physical and mental energy, our emotional energy is a limited resource. In 1992 Carla Joinson coined the term “compassion fatigue” after studying emotional energy and professional nurses. She solidified something that many people in the caring professions had already known: there is a limit to the amount of emotional energy a person can expend before they become tired, fatigued, and just burned out.

The term “compassion fatigue” has since been used as a means to examine the emotional burnout that not only appears in helping professionals such as nursing, counseling and teaching, but also in our family and personal relationships. The emotional system can be overloaded in the same manner whether you are in a helping profession or are supporting a friend, loved one, or family member through a difficult time. You might be experiencing compassion fatigue if you are supporting a roommate, significant other, or parent who is depressed, in mourning or is experiencing some emotional conflict of

their own. The effects of a taxed emotional system often show up as sadness, anxiety, and irritability. Physical symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, as well as stomach and intestinal distress are also common.

To keep your emotional energy in check, establish a healthy balance between helping others and the numerous demands of your life. In seeking balance, setting limits becomes important. Setting limits often means learning how to say “no” as well as acknowledging that you cannot provide all of the help that some friends or family members need. Seeking balance and setting limits means survival for you. Remember setting a limit DOES NOT mean you are selfish, self centered, or uncaring. Setting limits will help you conserve emotional energy allowing you to be more emotionally available when needed.

Concerned that you are showing signs of compassion fatigue? Join us on Tuesday, March 29, 2005 at 7:00 PM as Student Counseling Services addresses this issue in a program entitled *Helping Others*. The program will occur in room 375 of the Student Services Building and we would love to see you there. If you have any concerns, wish to speak to a counselor, or schedule an appointment, feel free to call 438-3655. You can also access us on the web at www.counseling.ilstu.edu/