

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## Flipping the Switch: Compassion Fatigue to Compassion Satisfaction

By Lindsay Dutton

When I first entered the field of disabilities a decade ago, I had never encountered the concept of compassion fatigue, nor did I understand the significance of trauma-informed care. I was unaware that I was stepping into a realm that was both profoundly rewarding and deeply exhausting. Like many of you, my primary motivation was to help others and make a meaningful impact in the world. However, I soon realized that supporting others necessitated prioritizing my own well-being. Self-care was not something I had considered at that time.

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My aim is to shed light on compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and resilience. I hope to equip Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) with the tools and support they need in their essential roles. Our brains have an amazing ability to both protect us, adapt, and change. Resilience can help us flip the switch from compassion fatigue to compassion satisfaction.

### What is compassion fatigue?

When thinking about the meaning of compassion fatigue, it is important to start with an understanding of the word compassion. Compassion is defined as “the sympathetic consciousness of other’s distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” In her book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, Kristin Neff expands on this stating,

*“Compassion is, by definition, relational. Compassion literally means ‘to suffer with,’ which implies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering. The emotion of compassion springs from the recognition that the human experience is imperfect.”*

This definition highlights the profound impact of compassion, illustrating how we genuinely offer a part of ourselves to others. But why do we engage in this selfless act? Consider the reasons that motivate you to pursue a career in a helping profession. Below, you will find a visual conversation that captures the responses I have gathered from others when I posed this question in the past.

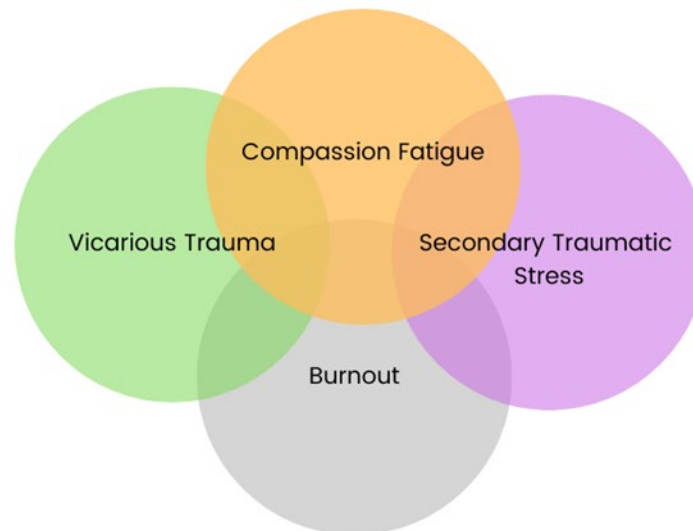


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You might connect with some of these reasons, and you may have your own to add. It is important to pause and remember our 'why,' especially on days when we feel overwhelmed or tired. However, just remembering our 'why' might not be enough to ease our stress.

Francoise Mathieu offers useful definitions in *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook* and points out that the following four terms are related but distinct from one another.



- **Compassion fatigue** is the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate.
- **Vicarious Trauma** is the transformation of our view of the world due to the cumulative exposure to traumatic images and stories. This can involve intrusive thoughts and imagery, as well as difficulty ridding ourselves of the traumatic experiences recounted by the people with whom we work.
- **Secondary traumatic stress** is the result of bearing witness to a traumatic event (or series of events), which can lead to PTSD-like symptoms.
- **Burnout** is stress and frustration caused by the workplace, e.g., having poor pay, unrealistic demands, heavy workload, heavy shifts, poor management, and inadequate supervision.

Burnout can happen in any job, which is why I mention it here—many people are familiar with the term. Vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress are often used interchangeably, but some experts believe that experiencing secondary trauma multiple times can lead to vicarious trauma. While I am focusing on compassion fatigue, it is important to understand these terms, as they are all relevant to those in helping professions.

### Contributing Factors and Symptoms

Compassion fatigue can arise for many reasons, many of which are beyond our control. If I were to ask a room full of providers about their experiences with high turnover, many would raise their hands. Similarly, many people, especially in rural areas, would agree they have faced a lack of resources. Below, you will find additional factors that can contribute to compassion fatigue. These factors and symptoms come from the Compassion Fatigue Workbook.

- Personal and current life factors
- Relationship to or close identification with those being supported
- Working conditions
- Insufficient resources
- High turnover
- Risk of personal injury
- Insufficient training
- High demands
- Large caseloads

Now that we understand what can contribute to compassion fatigue, let's discuss the symptoms. Remember, resilience empowers us to learn strategies for processing stressful events. Symptoms of compassion fatigue can be physical, behavioral, or psychological. It is important to note that many of these symptoms may also stem from other medical concerns, so always consult your doctor or another healthcare professional.

#### Physical signs:

- Physical exhaustion
- Somatization and hypochondria
- Headaches and migraines
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Increased susceptibility to illness

#### Behavioral signs:

- Anger and irritability
- Absenteeism
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, and other addictions
- Forgetfulness
- Impaired ability to make decisions
- Problems in personal relationships
- Exaggerated sense of responsibility
- Attrition
- Avoidance of clients
- Compromised care
- The silencing response

#### Psychological signs:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Distancing
- Negative self-image
- Depression
- Reduced sympathy and empathy
- Resentment
- Inability to tolerate strong feelings
- Feeling professional helplessness
- Diminished sense of enjoyment
- Difficulty separating personal and professional lives
- Disruption in world view/heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- Hypervigilance
- Loss of hope
- Intrusive imagery
- Hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional stimuli

While it is essential to recognize these symptoms, it is equally important not to dwell on them. If you are experiencing or suspect you might have any of these symptoms, remember that it is not your fault. You have not failed in your role, and the responsibility does not rest on your

shoulders. Consider reaching out to someone you trust to share your experiences in a safe environment. Many professionals are available to help you manage these symptoms. You are not alone! Now, let us shift our focus to compassion satisfaction and resilience, and explore ways to protect ourselves.

### What is compassion satisfaction?

At the beginning of this article, I shared definitions of compassion that resonate with the concept of compassion fatigue. Now, let's explore the term from a different perspective.

Neff and Germer introduced the concept of the yin & yang of self-compassion to illustrate its dual nature. Self-compassion manifests in two primary ways:

- **Yin** represents our internal approach, where we offer kindness to ourselves during difficult times. This includes how we soothe ourselves and validate our thoughts.
- **Yang** reflects our external actions, focusing on how we protect and motivate ourselves in the world.

Below is a graphic illustrating the yin & yang of self-compassion, sourced from the Positive Psychology website.



Beth Stamm defines compassion satisfaction as “the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well.” I appreciate this straightforward definition. While defining it is easy, embodying it presents a true challenge. The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities offers several strategies to help us cultivate compassion satisfaction:

- Proactively taking stock of and prioritizing the challenges you face
- Sharing challenges and potential solutions with others
- Carving out time for ourselves
- Practicing delegating
- Establishing a transition time and activity between work and home
- Learning to say, “no” (or “yes”) more often
- Assessing and managing your trauma inputs

- Joining a peer support group
- Attending professional training regularly
- Exercising regularly
- Practicing gratitude

Please do not feel pressured to tackle everything on this list all at once. Some of these practices require time to establish, while others can be implemented immediately. For instance, practicing gratitude is something you can start right away. One simple idea is to write down three things you are grateful for each day, or you can simply say them aloud to yourself.

Once you feel comfortable with gratitude, consider adding another practice into your daily routine until it becomes second nature. As a chronic perfectionist, I often see a list like this and think, "We must do EVERYTHING NOW." However, that mindset is not practical, although convincing my brain of that can be a challenge. If you relate to this, I encourage you to focus on just one practice. The goal is to lighten our load, not add to our stress.

Take a moment to reflect on what brings you joy at work. You might find that your answers resonate with your reasons for entering the helping profession. Keep this in mind as we transition to the final and most important concept: resilience.

### **What is Resilience?**

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as:

"the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."

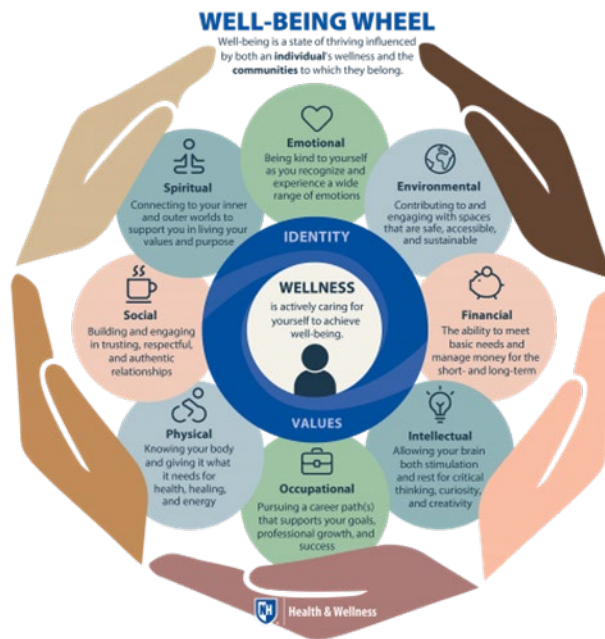
Compassion satisfaction and resilience are positively correlated: the more resilient we are, and the more we prioritize self-care and well-being, the more likely we are to experience compassion satisfaction.

You might be wondering how to cultivate resilience. The good news is that you already possess some resilience, and you can develop even more! Here are some key characteristics of resilience:

- Flexible and open minded
- Generally optimistic
- Live in the present
- Value & build good relationships
- Know and consider your limits
- Know how to handle rejection
- Practice self-care
- Sense of humor
- Practice patience and kindness
- Adapting to change

Whether you realize it or not, you likely possess two key characteristics from this list: adapting to change and practicing kindness and patience. Whether you are a DSP or in another helping profession, these traits are already within you. It is essential to remember that no one can embody these qualities 100% of the time. The key is to actively practice resilience.

Having discussed the characteristics of resilience, let's now explore what helps us build this resilience. There are various versions of the well-being wheel, but they share similar components. Below is an example of a well-being wheel that I particularly favor.



The eight pieces of the wheel include:

- **Emotional** - Being kind to yourself as you recognize and experience a wide range of emotions.
- **Environmental** - Contributing to and engaging with spaces that are safe, accessible, and sustainable.
- **Financial** - The ability to meet basic needs and manage money for the short and long-term.
- **Intellectual** - Allowing your brain both stimulation and rest for critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity
- **Occupational** - Pursuing a career path that supports your goals, professional growth, and success.
- **Physical** - Knowing your body and giving it what it needs for health, healing, and energy.
- **Social** - Building and engaging in trusting, respectful, and authentic relationships.
- **Spiritual** - Connecting to your inner and outer worlds to support you in living your values and purpose.

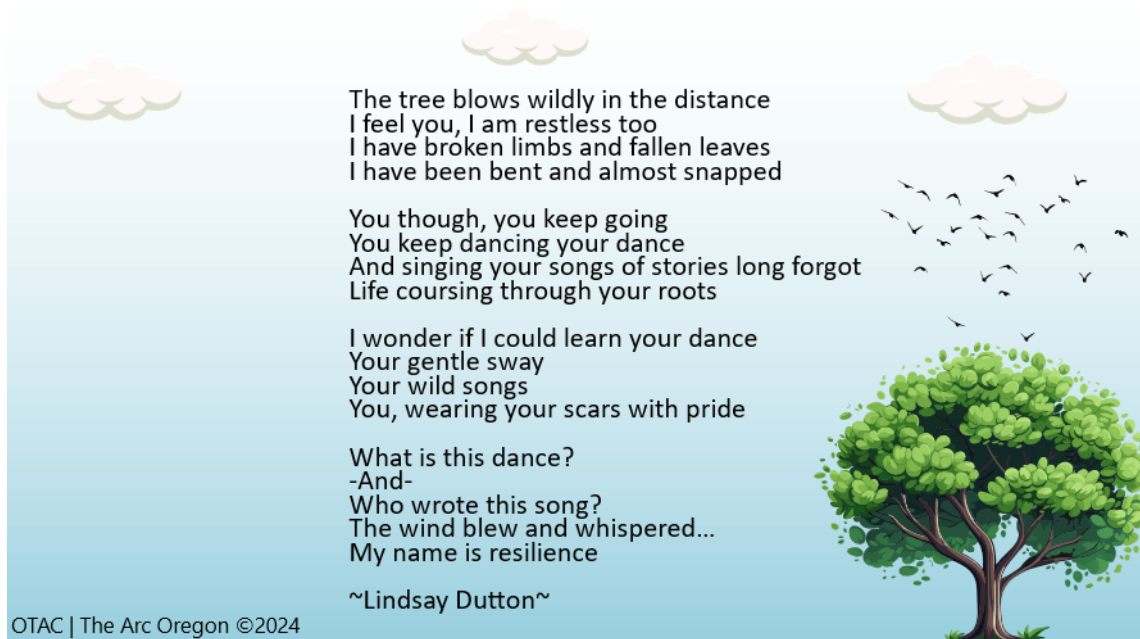
As I mentioned earlier, do not feel pressured to be perfect in every category. Instead, identify an area that needs more attention and start there. I know I have room for improvement in many of these areas. Like many aspects of life, these areas can ebb and flow over time.

Many of the self-care strategies we have discussed require time, but here is something quick you can do right now: create a support plan. Keep it short, simple, and accessible. Think of five straightforward actions you can take during moments of stress or when you feel overwhelmed. I created one for myself, which you can use as a reference. This allows me to quickly see five distinct ways to support myself during challenging moments.

MY SUPPORT PLAN	
#1	Use a sensory item
#2	Grounding Exercise 5 senses
#3	Take a walk outside
#4	Pet the cats or watch a funny cat video
#5	Ask for Support

Use this as a starting point and build from there. You can hang it in your workspace or create a smaller version to carry in your pocket, bag, or wallet. No matter how much we practice, visual reminders can be invaluable during times of stress and feeling overwhelmed.

As a final thought, I would like to share a poem I wrote during a challenging time in my life. I see nature, particularly trees, as a constant reminder of resilience.



The tree blows wildly in the distance  
I feel you, I am restless too  
I have broken limbs and fallen leaves  
I have been bent and almost snapped

You though, you keep going  
You keep dancing your dance  
And singing your songs of stories long forgot  
Life coursing through your roots

I wonder if I could learn your dance  
Your gentle sway  
Your wild songs  
You, wearing your scars with pride

What is this dance?  
-And-  
Who wrote this song?  
The wind blew and whispered...  
My name is resilience

~Lindsay Dutton~

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### About the author

My journey in the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) field began in 2015 when I started working at a foster home in McMinnville, Oregon, supporting adults. After a few years, I transitioned into a case management role at a brokerage, where I served as a Personal Agent. In this position, I provided person-centered support to adults living in their own homes.

In 2022, I pursued my dream of becoming an instructor and took on my current role as an OTAC trainer for The Arc Oregon. I hold several credentials, including Mental Health First Aid instructor, Trauma-Informed Care trainer, LifeCourse Ambassador, and Oregon ISP project consultant.

In my personal life, I enjoy spending time with my husband, Quilan, and our cats, Kili and Tyr. I love reading, playing video games, and watching Alfred Hitchcock movies. One of my favorite places is the Oregon coast, where I always feel refreshed and renewed by the beauty of the Pacific Ocean.

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