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On the Turning Away, Part I: Recognizing Compassion Fatigue in Meteorology

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Climate change increasing temperatures and worsening wildfires (to name just two consequences). COVID-19 running roughshod through the population since early 2020. Hurricanes devastating coastal, and tornadoes decimating inland, areas. The beat goes on, as they say; meteorologists (mostly) adapt. And yet, as 2021 has progressed, it is my sense that many on the meteorological front lines will agree when I state there has recently been a subtle shift towards compassion fatigue in the emotional foundation of the weather enterprise. This article, focused on awareness, and another in a subsequent newsletter on prevention and care, will address the compassion fatigue that occurs for meteorologists via a second-hand, or vicarious, experiencing of others' stress and traumatization.

Compassion is a sensitivity for the suffering of others and willingness to engage in such a way with the world as to alleviate some of that suffering. In meteorology, this is done through the protection of life and property and other acts of community kindness. Broadly, compassion fatigue is a long-term, elevated sense of emotional, physical, and/or spiritual distress caused by witnessing others' suffering. It manifests through an array of symptoms including

- chronic stress,
- sleep disturbance,
- heightened irritation, anger, depression, cynicism, physical fatigue and mental exhaustion,
- reduced cognitive ability, judgement/decision-making, and on-job morale,
- a sense of isolation,
- loss of self-worth, hope, and meaning,
- feeling that one is not doing enough,
- and a heightened sense of one's basic needs for safety, esteem, intimacy, and control.

These overlap with characteristics of more generalized burnout (e.g., stagnation, frustration, apathy). Whereas compassion fatigue can be sudden and originates on an emotional and interpersonal level due to engagement with others' suffering and pain, burnout tends to arise over time due to conflicts within the work setting.

To begin recognizing whether you might have experienced compassion fatigue recently, browse the list of characteristics above and reflect on the extent to which the following statements are, or have been, true of you (modified from Barnett 2014).

- My patterns of eating, sleeping, or concentration have changed.
- I isolate myself from friends, family, and colleagues.
- I don't take regular breaks when working.
- I am bored and disinterested, and I don't enjoy my work as much as I did.
- I am easily irritated.
- I feel emotionally exhausted and drained after meeting some of my clients.

- I am not taking good care of myself—overlooking my health and self-medicating.
- I find myself thinking of being elsewhere when I am at work.
- I find my work less rewarding than in the past.
- I regularly feel depressed, anxious, or agitated.
- I experience more headaches and other physical complaints.
- I can't concentrate and find myself staring into the distance.

Once you have recognized your compassion fatigue, you can begin to fight back. In the next article, I'll explore ways to go about doing this.

Reference

Barnett, J. E., 2014: Distress, therapist burnout, self-care, and the promotion of wellness for psychotherapists and trainees. Society for Psychotherapy.
<https://societyforpsychotherapy.org/distress-therapist-burnout-self-care-promotion-wellness-psychotherapists-trainees-issues-implications-recommendations/>

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