

On The Turning Away, Part II: Combatting Compassion Fatigue in Meteorology

Matthew J. Bolton

College of Arts and Sciences, Saint Leo University

I recently wrote an NWA Newsletter article (October, 2021) for awareness of compassion fatigue: a long-term, elevated sense of emotional, physical, and/or spiritual distress at the witnessing of others' suffering (Barnett 2014; Bolton 2021). I noted that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and recent weather disasters, there seems to be a shift underway for many meteorologists towards this fatigued state, a turning away from the weather-related needs of the publics they serve. Here, I discuss aspects of care for meteorologists who are experiencing compassion fatigue.

To start, awareness of one's experience is crucial. A compassion-fatigued person, dimmed to inner and outer experiences, perceives a less vivid, lower-resolution world. Compassion fatigue numbs us; it disconnects us from friends, family, work, and, most importantly, our sense of self. Our sense of who we are and everything flowing outward from that, down to our sense of purpose and sources of meaning in the world, becomes shallow when we are in this state. Thus, the first step in counteracting compassion fatigue is to return to ourselves. Psychologist Tara Brach (Brach 2019) introduced the R.A.I.N. method to mindful self-awareness, which can be used in our day-to-day lives: **R**ecognize what's going on; **A**llow the experience to be just as it is; **I**nvestigate with interest and care; and **N**urture with self-compassion. As Brach (2020) put it, "Recognizing means consciously acknowledging, in any given moment, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are affecting you...Allowing means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations you have recognized simply be there, without trying to fix or avoid...To investigate, call on your natural curiosity and direct a more focused attention to your present experience. You might ask yourself: 'What most wants attention? How am I experiencing this in my body? What am I believing? What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most need?' Self-compassion begins to naturally arise in the moments that you recognize you are suffering. It comes into fullness as you intentionally nurture your inner life with self-care."

Once we have a felt sense of ourselves in this way—and this is something we might have to continually practice with self-compassion—we can begin again. We can use R.A.I.N. to ground ourselves in any moment simply by focusing on our breath, on our feet on the floor, on any inner sensation or part of our body in contact with the outer world—noticing and then simply letting be whatever arises before moving on to the next moment. We can then more effectively manage our day-to-day stressors and engage a wider pattern of self-care involving time off from work, socializing, relaxation, favorite activities, and the like. We can, if needed, use this in conjunction with therapy or medication. Whatever action we need to alleviate compassion fatigue, we can only truly begin once we have acknowledged that we are, indeed, compassion-fatigued. R.A.I.N. allows us, through pure self-awareness as part of wider trauma stewardship (van Dernoot Lipsky and Burk 2009), to move towards healing and integration.

Author note: Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be addressed to Matthew Bolton, College of Arts and Sciences, Saint Leo University, Saint Leo, Florida. Email: Matthew.Bolton@email.saintleo.edu. Bolton, a crisis counselor and Master's candidate in psychology pursuing a career in natural disaster psychotherapy, was supported academically

during the period of this work by a U.S. National Weather Service-sponsored and American Meteorological Society-awarded Graduate Fellowship. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

References

- 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/>
- Bolton, M. J., 2021: On the turning away, part I: Recognizing compassion fatigue in meteorology. *National Weather Association Monthly Newsletter*, 21(10).
https://www.mattbolton.me/papers/Bolton_2021_NWA-meteorology-compassion-fatigue-1.pdf
- Brach, T., 2019: *Radical compassion: Learning to love yourself and the world with the practice of RAIN*. Penguin Books.
- Brach, T., 2020: RAIN: A practice of radical compassion. <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain-practice-radical-compassion/> and <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain>
- van Dernoot Lipsky, L., and Burk, C., 2009: *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.