



What Is Compassion Fatigue?

Foster Carers are not only exposed to the traumas the children they care for have suffered, they are also trying to manage complex and challenging behaviours, 24/7 because of these early traumas.

Foster Carers (and Adopters) are often ill-prepared, under-equipped and not adequately trained to.

- a) Recognise attachment difficulties
- b) Put strategies in place to deal with the resulting behaviours
- c) Protect themselves from the results of the child's trauma, whilst remaining empathic.
- d) Protect themselves from the child's own trauma.

This results in feelings of failure, despair, despondency, and depression, which may develop quickly, or over a long period of time.

The carer's inner resilience and strength may be eroded significantly over time, leaving a Foster Carer who had previously been energetic, enthusiastic, and insightful to be a shadow of their former self. Consequently, this has significant impact on levels of healing which can be offered to the child in placement.

From Jan Spilman, MEd, RCC Caregiver wellness

Foster parents work 24/7 with children who have been traumatized and, while research is still in the early exploratory stages, it does indicate that, because of this high level of secondary trauma exposure, foster parents **may be at greater risk for CF than other helping professionals**

1. Empathy: Empathy is needed to care for traumatized foster children but if foster parents over-empathize or over-identify with clients, they place themselves at risk for internalizing the children's trauma.

2. Insufficient Recovery Time: Foster parents may hear similar, horrific stories repeatedly, often seven days a week without the respite needed to heal or get some distance from the stories. Thus, an accumulated secondary trauma load builds and can lead to CF.

3. Unresolved Personal Trauma: Many foster parents have had traumatic experiences in their own lives. (e.g., loss of a family member, childhood abuse or neglect, accidents, addiction or mental illness in parents, serious illness, or disability in their family of origin, immigration trauma and others). To some extent, the pain of their own experiences can be "re-activated" by the trauma stories of their foster children, causing an increased risk for internalizing the children's trauma.

4. Children's Vulnerability: Young children are completely dependent upon adults for their emotional and physical needs. When adults mistreat children, it evokes a strong reaction in any person who cares about children. Foster parents are at risk for these strong emotional reactions and their inability to change the children's situation can make them even more vulnerable to CF.

Early research is also showing that broad brush training in childhood trauma and general self-care does not have an impact on CF risk in foster parents. As a result, Theda Parker's study of *CF in Foster Parents* at California State University, Fresno, suggests CF-specific training for all foster parents. (An idea with which Inspire Training concur wholeheartedly!) Perhaps, even better than attending a general CF workshop, would be the creation of a workshop specifically for foster parents ...?

Sometimes foster parents must take a break because they feel like they have nothing left to give to others. According to [blogger Dorothy Sander of Fabafterfifty](#), "Caring too much can use us up and make it impossible for us not only to keep on giving but also to enjoy our own lives. The degree to which we may be vulnerable to compassion fatigue will depend on both nature and nurture."

Kirsti A. Dyer MD, MS, FT, defines [compassion fatigue](#): "A state experienced by those helping people in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it is traumatizing for the helper. A deep physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion accompanied by acute emotional pain."

Compassion fatigue is usually felt by those in helping professions such as nurses, social workers, and emergency responders, but it may also be felt by foster parents as we help children and families who have experienced horrible abuse and neglect.