

## Compassion Fatigue can be Exhausting

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### NMAIMH competencies addressed

#### Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others/mentoring
- Empathy & compassion

#### Direct Service Skills

- Observation & listening

#### Reflection

- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
- Parallel Process
- Professional/personal development

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A quality that Home Visitors share is that they care deeply for the families that they work with. Home Visitors take a great deal of time and effort to build deep and safe relationships with their families to best support them. We genuinely love and care for the families that we work with. The relationship based approach that we practice makes us successful Home Visitors. However, at times that includes engaging in a great deal of empathy, shared experiences, or experiencing situations vicariously that families go through. Often caregiving professionals that have close relationships with those they serve can be exposed to the trauma that families are going through. We can use various strategies to cope with this exposure (so we can be present for our families) such as self-care for emotional regulation, mitigation strategies, Reflective Practice, and protective factors that build resilience.

Home Visitors can experience the stress of traumatic situations that families experience when they are retelling their experience to the Home Visitor. Primary Trauma happens directly to the individual and Secondary Trauma happens to someone else that doesn't directly experience the trauma firsthand but hears about it (Rides At The Door, 2020). Lipsky & Burk state in the book Trauma Stewardship, "Evaluating our response to trauma

exposure is critical, because how we are impacted by our work in the present directly affects our work in the future” (2009). Also, they point out that our work impacts our personal life and experiences with others that can put forth a cycle of damage that can engulf our lives if we are not practicing awareness (Lipsky & Burk, 2009). Dr. Meagan Rides states, “The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet” (2020).

In addition to Secondary Trauma, Home Visitors can experience Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Burn Out. Let’s examine the definitions of these terms. Vicarious Trauma can be seen as “negative transformation in the helper that results from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their trauma material, combined with a commitment or responsibility to help them” (Rides At The Door, 2020). In her presentation Dr. Rides provided a definition of Compassion Fatigue as, “The overall experience of emotional and physical fatigue that social service professionals experience due to chronic use of empathy when treating patients who are suffering in some way” (2020). She also defined Burn Out as “a syndrome with dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment” (2020). Often times you will find the three terms used synonymously or closely tied together, and with the term Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In a study conducted by the University of Georgia with Social Workers, it was found that exposure to others’ trauma can double the risk of Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Lipsky & Burk, 2009). Laura van Dernoot Lipsky & Connie Burk refer to the entire conversation in “*Trauma Stewardship*” which includes all of these ideas, how we come to the work, how we make sense and learn from these experiences, and how we are responsible and entrusted with one’s care (2009).

We have addressed how these experiences can weigh on our mental and emotional health. These are real experiences we have while working in the field of Home Visiting. Quite frankly, Compassion Fatigue can be Exhausting. How can we manage our feelings of exhaustion, stress, fatigue, and at times depression that stem from Compassion Fatigue? Something that may come to mind when trying to manage and juggle so many things is self-care. When we think of self-care, what comes to mind? What does that look like for home visitors? Sometimes when we discuss self-care, we have this idea that it has to be an extravagant or expensive undertaking. Maybe it looks like getting a pedicure or manicure, going to a spa and getting a wonderful massage, going on a weekend getaway, to name a few possibilities. These absolutely are fantastic activities to do and if you have the ability to do them, go for it! But let’s look at some activities that we could implement into our daily routine to help with compassion fatigue. Keep in mind that just as our families are different and have different needs, home visitors are similar when it comes to what works and doesn’t work for each individual.

Let's reclaim some self-care practices that most likely were getting neglected before. Take short breaks throughout the day to give you the chance to step away from the computer or phone. Understand that it's ok to be flexible and know that every day is most likely going to look different. Go for a nice walk or bike ride! Begin to write down or even verbally express how you are feeling daily to unload some feelings that might be causing heaviness. Take some time and play with your children or animals! Revisit some old hobbies that may have been put on a shelf to collect dust. These are just a few examples of activities that can be incorporated into a daily routine to help with self-care. As stated above, find out what works best for you. One thing we feel everyone should remember is this, self-care is giving the world the best of you, not what's left of you (Ripper, 2019).

In addition to utilizing some self-care strategies, reflective supervision is a component of our home visiting system that home visitors can utilize to help with unloading some of their feelings associated with families' hardships. It is a time to openly communicate with someone that is trusting in regards to what the work is looking like and the positive or negative effects it may be having on a person. It provides a safe space to share the struggles and successes a home visitor is experiencing. Reflective supervision is a preventative strategy when dealing with compassion fatigue.

In closing, Home Visiting is such a rewarding and caring profession. With the immense amount of caring and depth of involvement in developing relationships with our families, we live alongside them as they experience trauma. These are real experiences and can be exhausting and stressful. As previously mentioned, we can use many strategies to cope with this exposure to family trauma so we can continue to be present to support them.

#### **Questions to encourage discussion and reflection:**

- What has self-care looked like for you during the current pandemic?
- What has self-care looked like for your home visiting families during this time?
- Have there been conversations surrounding any Secondary Trauma you may be experiencing during reflective supervision?

#### **References/Additional resources:**

Lipsky, L. V., & Burk, C. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Rides At The Door, M. (Writer). (2020, May 28). *Secondary Exposure to Trauma in Tribal Communities (NMCYFD)* [Video file]. In *Google Drive*. Retrieved from [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BQ\\_IMQvRjM\\_yEYXHfKgX2UpMypmJn8\\_7](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BQ_IMQvRjM_yEYXHfKgX2UpMypmJn8_7)



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Ripper, Janine. (2019). 21 Quotes to Motivate You and Take Care of Yourself. Retrieved June 24, 2020 From <https://reflectionsfromaredhead.com/take-care-of-yourself/>.