



## **COVID-19 AFTEREFFECTS AND THE HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE: BURN OUT AND COMPASSION FATIGUE**

By: Laurie Kolosky, RPT, Director of Programs and Education/Site Coordinator of Clinical Education

Worry, exhaustion, constantly changing safety rules, and long hours of wearing PPE are just a few challenges healthcare personnel have faced during the past 15 months. We are now witnessing the aftereffects of COVID-19 with amped-up levels of burn out amongst healthcare workers including an exodus from the healthcare field. According to a Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll, roughly 3-in-10 health-care workers have weighed leaving their profession. More than half are suffering burn out, and about 6-in-10 say stress from the pandemic has harmed their mental health.

The consequences are concerning not only for the well-being of the health care workforce but for patient care. According to a 2019 report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, clinician burnout is associated with a heightened risk of patient safety incidents, poor quality of care, ineffective provider-patient communications, and reduced patient satisfaction.

We know that employee engagement is key to emerging more successfully from this pandemic, but just over half of the members of any team are likely not engaged. These individuals are physically present but are unhappy and psychologically absent from their jobs. Furthermore, these employees share their unhappiness with other employees.

Two similar syndromes we should consider with the healthcare workforce in the SNF environment are Compassion Fatigue and Burn out. As we look for solutions to combat both burnout and/or compassion fatigue, we first need to educate health care teams on how to be more aware of these syndromes within themselves and each other.

**COMPASSION FATIGUE** the physical, emotional, and spiritual result of chronic self-sacrifice and/or prolonged exposure to difficult situations that renders a person unable to love, nurture, care for, or empathize with another's suffering. Personally, they may suffer physical ailments such as headaches and GI issues and exhibit psychosocial traits such as apathy, detachment, depression, and irritability. Additional compassion fatigue traits that may affect people are lack of sleep, loss of self-worth, loss of hope, and changes in their worldview and spirituality.

**BURN OUT** is emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness in the workplace, including chronic negative responses to stressful workplace conditions.

### **Burn out is more likely when employees:**

- Expect too much of themselves
- Never feel that the work they are doing is good enough
- Feel inadequate or incompetent
- Feel unappreciated for their work efforts
- Have unreasonable demands placed upon them
- Are in roles that are not a good job fit

### **Some of the signs and symptoms that an employee experiencing burn out may exhibit include:**

- Reduced efficiency and energy
- Lowered levels of motivation
- Increased errors
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Irritability
- Increased frustration
- Suspiciousness
- More time spent working with less being accomplished

Left unchecked, either of these syndromes can lead to inadequate performance and decreased holistic health. Healthcare providers may demonstrate poor judgment, make errors, have less than desirable interactions with patients, colleagues, and they may choose to leave their professions.

We should consider solutions to address burnout/compassion fatigue, begin by providing education. A resource for recognizing various traits of burn out/compassion fatigue are found with in the 8 Dimensions of Wellness. Provide engaging activities for employees that speak to each of these dimensions in an effort to raise their awareness of potential burn out and/or compassion fatigue.

**Looking at each of these dimensions more closely:**

1. **Emotional Wellness:** includes your thoughts, emotions, and ability to deal with life’s challenges. This can be accomplished by:
  - a. Appreciate the good times and special moments
  - b. Reduce stress with stress management techniques
  - c. Getting quality sleep
  - d. Coping with loss through positive strategies such as counseling
  - e. Strengthen social connections with family, friends, or volunteering
  - f. Be mindful, which is the practice of being fully aware of what is happening in the present



**2. Physical Wellness:** includes your thoughts, emotions, and ability to deal with life's challenges. This can be accomplished by:

- a. Taking the initiative to reduce risk of chronic disease and prevent injury
- b. Following a comprehensive fitness routine, including cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training
- c. Making healthy choices regarding use of drugs and alcohol
- d. Encouraging healthy sleeping habits
- e. Making healthy nutritional choices

**3. Occupational Wellness:** is the ability to achieve a balance between work and leisure in a way that promotes health, a sense of personal satisfaction and is financially rewarding. Signs of Occupational Wellness include:

- a. Engaging in motivating and interesting work
- b. Understanding how to balance your work with leisure time
- c. Working in a way that fits into your personal learning style
- d. Communicating and collaborating with others
- e. Working independently and with others
- f. Feeling inspired and challenged at work
- g. Feeling good at the end of the day about the work you accomplished

**4. Social Wellness:** the ability to care for others while we take good care of ourselves. Some ways to improve social wellness include:

- a. Taking ample time for self-care or "me time"
- b. Knowing your needs: what are your values, what angers you, what calms you down
- c. Ensuring you are eating and sleeping well each day
- d. Building a supportive network of like-minded individuals who share your values and interests
- e. Learning to express yourself in constructive ways
- f. Letting go of toxic relationships
- g. Learning to say **YES** to opportunities and **NO** to activities that drag you down

**5. Intellectual Wellness:** is maintaining an optimal cognitive level to process learning, solve problems, and make decisions to manage daily life. It includes:

- a. Recognizing your creative abilities
- b. Finding ways to expand your knowledge and skills
- c. Critical thinking, creativity, and curiosity
- d. Being a lifelong learner while valuing life experiences
- e. Being open to new experiences and ideas, expanding your mind and potential
- f. Simply sharing and receiving knowledge with others



**6. Spiritual Wellness:** is the process by which you seek meaning and purpose in life. It can be achieved in a variety of ways including:

- a. Scheduling time to think about your life and why you do the things you do
- b. Exploring different faiths and religions or what aligns best with your core beliefs
- c. Practicing mindfulness which is being conscious and aware of your thoughts and feelings and less distracted
- d. Traveling and exploring new places. Traveling allows you to meet new people and experience different cultures. Doing so gives you a broader perspective on life and helps you appreciate the little things
- e. Taking the time to mentor and help others is a great way to open up your heart and experience the benefits of giving back

**7. Environmental Wellness:** is the way you feel about, respect and protect the world around you. Signs of good environmental wellness include:

- a. Being aware of the limits of the earth's natural resources
- b. Conserving energy (i.e., Shutting off unused lights)
- c. Recycling paper, cans, and glass as much as possible
- d. Appreciating and spend time outside in natural settings
- e. Avoiding pollution of the air, water or earth if you can avoid doing so
- f. Avoiding second-hand smoke

**8. Financial Wellness:** refers to a person's overall financial health and the absence of money-related stress. Tips that can help you stay financially healthy include:

- a. Income stability
- b. Know where your money is going each month
- c. Ensure you have an emergency fund
- d. Build your savings
- e. Know and understand your credit score
- f. Know what you owe to begin to reduce your debt
- g. Formulate a retirement plan now

A concentrated approach for the consideration of employee wellness is the goal for companies to adopt into their culture. This foundation provides employees with a variety of resources for dealing with the after effects of COVID-19 burn out and compassion fatigue. When supportive models are implemented, employees are more apt to be keenly aware of burn out and compassion fatigue symptoms, resulting in a healthier workforce post COVID-19.

---

#### **ABOUT PREFERRED THERAPY SOLUTIONS**

*Preferred Therapy Solutions is a full-service rehabilitation management organization dedicated to providing state-of-the-art clinical, management, billing, and information technology solutions to the post-acute and long-term care industry. Preferred Therapy Solutions is able to assist in developing a strategic road map designed to increase SNFs market share by identifying potential referral targets and providing useful information on competitor's performance. Preferred Therapy Solutions abilities significantly enhance the quality, productivity, scope, and efficiency of any facility's rehabilitation department while maintaining a focus on achieving high levels of patient satisfaction and providing excellent customer service.*

#### **SOURCES**

<https://allwork.space/2018/11/the-best-snacks-to-improve-cognitive-function-in-the-workplace/>  
<https://www.alive.com/health/seven-dimensions-of-wellness/>  
How to re-engage your employees' post-COVID - TheJobNetwork  
Pandemic leads to compassion fatigue, burnout for health care workers | Lipscomb University  
Emotional Wellness Toolkit | National Institutes of Health (NIH)  
<https://spokane.wsu.edu/wellness/occupational-wellness/>  
What Is Social Wellness? Tips to Improve Your Social Health 2021 (lifecares.org)  
What Is Spiritual Wellness and Why Is It Important? | IntroWellness  
[www.ou.edu/wellness/resources/wellness-presentations](http://www.ou.edu/wellness/resources/wellness-presentations)  
[www.counseling.org/news/aca-blogs/aca-member-blogs/aca-member-blogs/2016/05/17/promoting-intellectual-wellness-over-the-lifespan](http://www.counseling.org/news/aca-blogs/aca-member-blogs/aca-member-blogs/2016/05/17/promoting-intellectual-wellness-over-the-lifespan)  
<https://news.illinoisstate.edu/2014/10/tips-improve-environmental-wellness/>  
<https://introwellness.com/health/what-is-environmental-wellness/>  
<https://www.healthysteps4u.org/test/environmental-wellness/>  
<https://www.meratas.com/blog/tips-to-achieve-financial-wellness>