

Insights is published by ESS as a service for educational professionals. Each issue highlights an important research article and provides practical applications of the findings for the classroom and the school environment.

Recognizing Teacher Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

While most would agree that a teacher's role is, first and foremost, to educate students, it is also clear that today's teacher is expected to adopt multiple other roles and functions. Teachers are increasingly expected to be motivators, mentors, behavioral specialists, parent advocates, and guardians of their students' sense of safety and belonging at school. At the same time that teachers' roles are expanding, so too are the demands to keep up with and incorporate technology into the classroom, to create and implement curricula that are consistent with revised standards and are adaptable to each student's learning style, and to meet testing and other accountability requirements.

Adding to teacher stress is the reality that more than 10 million children each year in the United States experience traumatic events in their lives, according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Expanded roles and responsibilities, along with daily exposure to students whose lives are touched by trauma, make America's teachers vulnerable to both burnout and compassion fatigue.

"Burnout", a concept that has been around since the 1970's, is defined as a long-term, chronic state of stress that impacts people in the helping professions. It is characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and a sense of detachment and lack of sympathy toward people. Across various studies, burnout has been associated with lower job and life satisfaction, psychosomatic symptoms, absenteeism, depressive symptoms, self-doubt, and exhaustion.

"Compassion Fatigue", also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS) or vicarious trauma, is characterized by "the natural emotional and behavioral reactions that occur from the knowledge of someone close experiencing a traumatic event, combined with the stress caused by the desire to help that individual."

Symptoms of PTSD sufferers as well as those with compassion fatigue can include re-experiencing the trauma through dreams, recollections, and/or flashbacks; avoiding

or "numbing out" the reminders of the trauma through detachment from others or through substance use; diminished affect; and heightened/persistent arousal that can manifest in difficulty sleeping, irritability, and/or hypervigilance (e.g. startle reactions).

A teacher's greatest strengths, dedication and emotional investment in his/her students, can also be a teacher's greatest liability: the more devoted teachers are to their profession, the more likely they are to experience burnout or compassion fatigue. As we begin 2019, ESS hopes that you will put better self-care high on the list of your New Year's Resolutions:

- Use a daily journal to release troubling thoughts and feelings.
- Integrate wellness activities into your daily routine: e.g. exercise, meditation, improved nutrition
- Actively plan experiences that boost positive emotions, professional and otherwise, and avoid situations that exacerbate negativity (e.g. a constantly complaining colleague).
- Participate in professional development activities: research has shown that this can be an antidote to burnout.
- Be clear about what is yours to do, e.g., be present with students at school and foster a sense of safety and belonging, even though you can't change family dysfunction or an impoverished environment.
- Don't go it alone. Talk to colleagues, administrators, friends and family, and seek professional help if symptoms worsen or persist. ESS staff can readily point you toward community resources.

RESOURCES:

Compassion Fatigue: The Silent Thief in Our Schools
<http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol11/1118-sizemore.aspx>

The Cost of Caring: 10 Ways to Prevent Compassion Fatigue
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/the-cost-of-caring-10-ways-to-prevent-compassion-fatigue-0209167>.

Effective School Solutions
info@effectiveschoolsolutions.com
www.effectiveschoolsolutions.com
973-299-9954