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**Weathering the Perils and Pitfalls of Working as a Rehabilitation Provider:**  
Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, Vicarious Trauma, and What We Can Do About It

SMALL STEPS. GIANT STRIDES.

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**The Why...**



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**My A-Ha Moment...**



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**My Lens**



Healthcare provider  
Direct care position  
Rehabilitation (BI + Neuro) focus

But widely applicable to other professions, populations, and non-work scenarios

- Caregivers

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**Definitions: Burnout**



3 components in the traditional work-related definition (Freudenberger, 1970s)

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization (separate emotionally from work)
- Decreased sense of accomplishment

→ We think about more comprehensively now (not just work)

→ Simple Definition: *“feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by everything you have to do while still worrying that you’re not doing enough”* – Emily and Amelia Nagoski

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**Definitions: Compassion Fatigue**

- First identified in nurses as the “loss of the ability to nurture” (Joinson, 1992)
- Charles Figley “The cost of caring” (Figley, 2006)
- “The deep physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that can result from working day-to-day in an intense caregiving environment.” (Figley, 2006)
- KEY feature is the diminished ability to feel compassion for others



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### Definitions: Vicarious Trauma



- Developed by McCann & Perlman (1990)
- When a person, particularly health professionals, experiences a profound shift in world view, spirituality, or self-identity due to empathetic bonding while being exposed to another person's/client's trauma.
- The **cumulative transformative effect** upon the professional who is working with survivors of traumatic life events.
- Being traumatized or negatively impacted by other people's trauma.
- Sometimes compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and secondary traumatic stress are used interchangeably

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### Definitions: Human Giver Syndrome


**Human Giver** coined by Kate Manne

- She proposed two categories of humans:
  - **Human beings** - those with moral obligation to *maximize* their human potential, acquire, succeed, accomplish things in the world.
  - **Human givers** - those with moral obligation to *give* their humanity - their time, attention, love, bodies, aspirations, and really lives, in service of other people's comfort and needs.

**Human Giver Syndrome** coined by Emily and Amelia Nagoski

- "The false, contagious belief that women have a moral obligation to be pretty, happy, calm, generous, and attentive to the needs of others."
- **However**, they emphasize that this can certainly apply to men as well
- Broader definition: the false belief that some people are expected to pervasively give of themselves, really sacrifice themselves, in service of others.

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### Symptoms...how does this Feel?



- Feeling physical, psychological and emotional exhaustion
- Feeling helpless, hopeless or powerless – *what's the point?*
- Feeling irritable, angry, notable anger towards the events or people causing the suffering
- Reduced compassion**, sadness
- Cognitive distortions**: over and under-attributing, broad sweeping assumptions, pessimism, cynicism and *I already know how this is going to turn out*
- A sense of being detached, withdrawn or **numb**
- Apathy, **low motivation/activation**, avoidance or dread of working with some clients
- Concentration difficulty, inattention, **rumination**, unwanted thoughts
- Hypervigilance, **increased arousal**, easily activated/**amped/distressed**
- Self-blame** and beliefs that **you have not done enough to help the people who are suffering**
- A decreased sense of personal and professional accomplishment
- A change in your worldview or spirituality, questioning the good in the world
- Physical symptoms**: appetite and sleep disturbances, muscle tension, digestive problems and dizziness
- Loss of purpose or meaning, **losing touch with your why**

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**Self-Assessment**

ProQOL – self assessment for burnout and compassion fatigue

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**What the Research Says**

- 45-71% of physical therapists report burnout (Lo et al., 2017).
- **AND** nearly half of them (46.8%) are more burnt out now than they were before Covid (WebPT)
- 42% of social workers said they suffered from secondary traumatic stress (Adams et al., 2006).
- New employees heavily exposed to trauma are at highest risk – Patel & Bartholomew (2021) found that low perceived competence and high secondary trauma were associated with highest rates of burnout
- -50% of PTs poled in 2019 (pre-pandemic!) were thinking about making a professional change within the next five years (e.g., working fewer hours or moving out of patient care altogether). Top reason - better work-life balance. (WebPT)
- Covid-19 pandemic was associated with a 40% increase in burnout amongst non-direct care nursing staff (Peacock, 2023)

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**Additional Stats**

- 79% of hospice nurses endorsed moderate to high rates of compassion fatigue (Abendroth & Flannery, 2006).
- 70% of therapists working with sexual assault survivors experienced vicarious trauma (Lobel, 1997).
- 50% of child welfare workers endorsed traumatic stress symptoms in the severe range (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).
- 50% of child protection workers suffered from 'high' to 'very high' levels of compassion fatigue (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).
- 35% of PTs reported experiencing moderate to high levels of secondary trauma (Patel & Bartholomew, 2021)
- After just 4 years of service, rehab professionals increasingly consider reducing their work hours. (WebPT)

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### Associated Health Impacts

- Over time, compassion fatigue makes you ill!
- Increased incidence of:
  - Cardiovascular disease
  - Hypertension
  - Obesity
  - Type 2 diabetes
  - Various gastrointestinal conditions
  - Immune dysfunction
  - Sleep challenges
  - Addiction



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### Real Life Examples

- *They can't do it without me...*
- *If I prioritize what I need, I'll be letting everyone down...*
- *My coworkers/boss probably think I'm slacking off...*
- *I feel like my tank is empty and I have nothing else to give...*
- Not allowing yourself to take time off, talking yourself out of taking time off, or feeling guilty when you do...
- Frequently thinking about work when you're "off"?
- Engaging in work tasks while taking PTO (e.g., checking emails, texts)?
- How often do you take time off that isn't for appointments, family events, sick kiddos, misc adulting things...?



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### Risk Factors


Some approaches, styles, beliefs increase your risk of burnout:

- Working longer hours
- Not delegating
- Not allowing yourself to take breaks
- **Not saying no...**
- Bottling up feelings
- Avoiding or procrastinating
- Perfectionism
- Taking work home
- **Lack of boundaries**
- **Not sharing with others**
- Squeezing out hobbies

*"Letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth"*



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**Soooo, what can we do about it??**



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**The cure is not “self-care”...**



- *“Put on your own oxygen mask first”*
- *“You can’t pour from an empty cup”*
- Why don’t these sayings ring entirely true? Come off as trite, hollow, or oversimplified? Why do we hear ourselves internally saying “yes, but...”?
- Human Giver Syndrome and associated feelings of moral obligation, duty, ingrained messaging
- “Self-care” can become yet another to-do item or feel like something else we’re “failing” at
- How can we self-care when we’re burnt out....we can’t, at least not alone. It requires others, group effort. Support unit needs to care for your well-being as much as you care for theirs

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**Completing the Stress Cycle**

Emily and Amelia Nagoski

- Difference between stress and stressor
- Why this happens - biological - primitive fight, flight, or freeze responses to keep us safe but long ago those often had built in ways to expel the stress associated with the event
- What is the stress cycle?
- Stress and emotions are tunnels - you have to GO through them to GET through them.

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### 7 Ways to Complete the Stress Cycle

Physical Activity Breathing Positive Social Interaction

Affection Crying

Creative Expression Laughter

From Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking Your Stress Cycle

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CONFIDENTIAL <https://www.thejoy-box.com/blog/news/you-have-never-heard-of-human-giver-syndrome>

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### Brene Brown

- Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries – *what's ok and what's not ok*

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### Organizational Support & Culture

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**The Nuggets to Take with You:**

- Learn your top signs of burnout/CF/VT
- Work on identifying and **acknowledging** those signs when they happen
- Call it what it is! The saying is important!
- Ask others for what you need
- Identify your most effective ways to complete the stress cycle – have some backups
- Build those strategies into your daily/weekly routine
- What does this mean about my journey of vulnerability, authenticity, and learning to love and nurture the human that I am.

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**Links**

- Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction Scale
  - <https://proqol.org/proqol-measure>
- TED article on ways to complete the stress cycle – Nagoski sisters
  - <https://ideas.ted.com/emotionally-exhausted-burnout-completing-stress-response-cycle/>
- TED Nagoski convo:
  - [https://www.ted.com/talks/emily\\_nagoski\\_and\\_amelia\\_nagoski\\_the\\_cure\\_for\\_burnout\\_hint\\_it\\_isn\\_t\\_self\\_care?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/emily_nagoski_and_amelia_nagoski_the_cure_for_burnout_hint_it_isn_t_self_care?language=en)
- Brene Brown Website – everything there is good!
  - <https://brenebrown.com/>
  - Her entire podcast collection is available there – years worth of podcasts and super well-known people – Obama, Oprah, just to name a few

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