

COMPASSION FATIGUE IN THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

"I feel burned out and don't know where to turn," said the funeral director at a state conference this past summer.

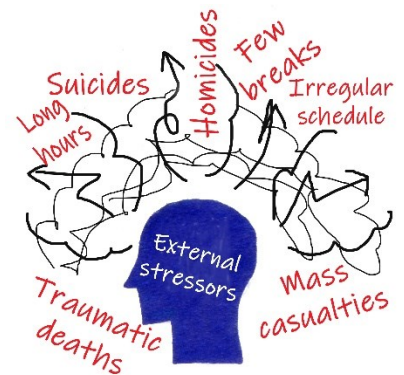
I admired his honesty, and an engaging conversation about compassion fatigue ensued. What exactly is compassion fatigue, and what makes the funeral industry at risk?

As a primary caregiver to the newly bereaved, funeral directors are subjected to traumatic stories through the families they comfort. Absorbing repeat exposure to secondary trauma coupled with long, irregular hours with few breaks are key ingredients that fuel the perfect storm—compassion fatigue.

It's a disorder that develops from doing your best funeral work without taking time to refuel the heart and decontaminate the mind.

Death is a daily occurrence for funeral professionals. It's more than a job—it's a calling that takes a special heart. While death is the foundation of the funeral industry, it's the repeat exposure to disturbing deaths—suicides, homicides, accidental deaths, mass casualties—that poses compassion fatigue as an industry danger.

In addition to the rise in traumatic deaths, the number of annual deaths in the U.S. has jumped from 2.4 million in 2010, to over 3.3 million in 2020 (CDC, April 2021). Over the same time, the number of funeral homes servicing those deaths declined by over a thousand (NFDA.org), meaning higher workload for those in today's industry.



THE COST OF CARING

Anyone who cares for others as part of their professional responsibilities is someone who has a higher risk of suffering from compassion fatigue. By the numbers (Gaille, 2017):

- 87% of emergency responders have reported symptoms of compassion fatigue
- 70% of mental health professionals have experienced compassion fatigue
- 1 in 2 child welfare workers experience symptoms of compassion fatigue in the severe range

Even Mother Teresa understood compassion fatigue—she mandated her nuns take an entire year off from their duties every 4 to 5 years to allow them to heal from the effects of their

caregiving work (Stress.org). Yet, interestingly enough, compassion fatigue has been studied very little in the oldest caring profession in the world—funeral professionals.

HOW IT HAPPENS . . . AND HOW TO HELP

When funeral professionals are unable to recharge while juggling families in crisis, the emotional residue of secondary traumatic stress can erode one's mental and physical health. Common feelings include irritability, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, and worse—clinical errors. Without mitigation, it can even lead to career-ending burnout.

To fully understand how it develops and how to protect against it, we must be aware of our own stressors, examine our work-life balance, and cultivate positive connections.

AWARENESS:

- What types of cases do you take home with you?
- What cases increase your vulnerability to compassion fatigue?
- What external stressors are going on in your life?

BALANCE:

- How do you set emotional boundaries?
- How do you minimize external stress?
- What self-care activities allow you to de-stress?

CONNECTIONS:

- Have you built a positive support system?
- What connections do you have to like-minded activity groups?

A noble profession, the funeral industry requires a strong sense of decorum, compassion yet professionalism, empathy yet common sense. Finding a balance in a busy profession that leaves little time for self-care is a challenge.

Proactively developing—and regularly practicing—positive stress-buffering habits can help offset stress and restore a sense of control before it impacts performance, disrupts quality of care, or worse—lead to career burnout.

Because none of us can pour from an empty cup.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lynda Cheldelin Fell is founding partner of the International Grief Institute, author of the award-winning Grief Diaries anthology series, retired firefighter/EMT certified in critical incident stress management, and a member of the continuing education faculty at Whatcom Community College. She has earned six national literary awards and five national advocacy award nominations for her work. International Grief Institute is dedicated to building community resilience through program and trainings available exclusively for the funeral industry.

For a 90-minute workshop on evidence-based modalities to mitigate compassion fatigue in the funeral industry, contact Lynda Cheldelin Fell at 360-510-8590 or lynda@internationalgriefinstitute.com.