Compassion Fatigue = Multiple/Ongoing Exposure to Trauma 
plus
Burnout ( demand > resource )

There is a cost to caring. Professionals who listen to the stories of fear, pain and suffering of others may feel similar fear, pain and suffering because they care. Professionals especially vulnerable to Compassion Fatigue (CF) include emergency care workers, counselors, mental health professionals, medical professionals, clergy, advocate volunteers, and human service workers. If you ever feel as though you are losing your sense of self to the clients you serve, you may be suffering from CF.

The concept of Compassion Fatigue emerged only in the last several years in the professional literature. It represents the cost of caring about and for traumatized people. Compassion Fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to working with the suffering, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. Professionals who work with people, particularly people who are suffering, must contend with not only the normal stress or dissatisfaction of work, but also with the emotional and personal feelings for the suffering.

Compassion Fatigue is NOT "burnout". Burnout is associated with stress and hassles involved in your work; it is cumulative, is relatively predictable and frequently a vacation or change of job helps a great deal. Compassion Fatigue is very different. There are human costs associated with CF. Job performance goes down, mistakes go up. Morale drops and personal relationships are affected. People’s home lives start to deteriorate, eventually Compassion Fatigue can lead to overall decline in general health.

Source: http://www.ace-network.com/cfspotlight.htm#WhatIs%20CF

Recognizing Symptoms
Compassion Fatigue symptoms arise from the caregiving work you perform on a regular basis. While the symptoms are often disruptive, depressive, and irritating, an awareness of the symptoms and their negative effect on your life can lead to positive change, personal transformation, and a new resiliency.

Normal symptoms present in an individual include:

- Excessive blaming
- Receives unusual amount of complaints from others
- Difficulty concentrating
- Apathy, sad, no longer finds activities pleasurable
- Voices excessive complaints about administrative functions
- Substance abuse used to mask feelings
- Compulsive behaviors such as overspending, overeating, gambling, sexual addictions
- Reoccurrence of nightmares and flashbacks to traumatic event
- Chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems and recurrent colds

When Compassion Fatigue hits critical mass in the workplace, the organization itself suffers. Chronic absenteeism, spiraling Worker’s Comp costs, high turnover rates, friction between employees, and staff & management, are organizational symptoms that surface, creating additional stress on workers.

Organizational symptoms of Compassion Fatigue include:

- Negativism towards management
- Inability of staff to believe improvement is possible
- High absenteeism
- Inability for teams to work well together
- Desire among staff members to break company rules
- Inability of staff to complete assignments and tasks
- Strong reluctance toward change
- Lack of a vision for the future
- Lack of flexibility among staff
- Changes in staff dynamics
- Outbreaks of aggressive behaviors
- Inability to respect/meet deadlines

That which is to give light must endure burning. ~ Viktor Frankl
Alleviating Compassion Fatigue

Once you realize that you are a candidate for compassion fatigue, or are already suffering its effects, exploring this new awareness can lead to insights concerning past traumas, pain, and defeating behaviors. A common and understandable coping mechanism in care giving is to simply stuff the overwhelming emotions that surface repeatedly in your work. How else can you keep going? Eventually, those emotions refuse to be ignored. All too often, psychological and physical crisis occurs.

With information, mindful attention, and skillful self-care, you can attend to your Compassion Fatigue. Most people never take the time to understand how their jobs affect them emotionally. Give yourself credit for moving forward and affecting change. Your hard work will pay off.

Skillful Self-Care Begins With the Following:

• Be kind to yourself.
• Express your needs verbally.
• Enhance your awareness with education.
• Accept where you are on your path at all times.
• Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you.
• Clarify your personal boundaries. What works for you; what doesn't.

Mindful Attention in 6 Dimensions

1. Somatic Self-regulation
2. Colleagial support: Offloading
3. Intentionality, re: Values
4. Inspiration: Filling the Well
5. Releasing: Forms of letting go
6. Grounding: Care for the Body

For Further Reading

• Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized, by Charles Figley, 1995.
• Treating Compassion Fatigue by Charles Figley, 2002.
• Healthy Caregiving: A Guide To Recognizing And Managing Compassion Fatigue by Patricia Smith, 2009.
• www.compassionfatigue.org

Caring for yourself is one of the most essential—and often the most overlooked—aspects of being a skillful caregiver. When you take care of your own needs, the person you care for will benefit, too. It is not selfish to meet your own needs — it is an important part of the job. You are responsible for your own self-care.