

## Respecting Yourself in the Presence of Distress<sup>1-4</sup>

Empathic distress and burnout are occupational hazards that come from the stresses of working in a field focused on caring for others. Getting to a place of distress is a snowballing process that can be a mix of organizational stressors and being a witness to the suffering of others. Some people can interrupt the process and be fully restored by taking a vacation or going to a spa, but most of us need to make life changing choices that put our own health and well-being at the top of the priority list. Attending to our well-being is a sign of respect for our professions, the people in our care, ourselves, and those we love and who love us.

### Developing a Personal Warning System

Author of the Compassion Fatigue Workbook, Françoise Mathieu<sup>5</sup>, suggests developing your own warning system scale for knowing when you are entering into distress. A warning system can serve as a routine check-in process for tracking your levels of emotional and physical depletion. It can also help you remember to spend time focusing on behaviors and strategies that are life affirming and nourishing.

Take a look at the following lists and identify/mark which warning signs are **your most frequent**.

#### Emotional/Psychological Warning Signs

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- Anger at work or home
- Cynicism at work or home
- Depersonalization – spacing out during work or the drive home
- Difficulty separating personal and professional lives
- Diminished sense of enjoying career
- Dread of working with certain patients/families/cases/colleagues
- Emotional exhaustion
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Excessive fear of getting sick
- Hypersensitivity to emotional stimuli
- Increased anxiety and fears
- Intrusive imagery
- Lingering guilt
- Numbing and insensitivity to emotional material and situations
- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy towards patients or your family/friends
- Resentment of demands being put on you at work and/or at home
- Suicidal thoughts [\\*see note on back](#)

#### Physical Warning Signs

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- Exhaustion
- Grinding your teeth at night
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Increased susceptibility to illness
- Insomnia
- Irritable bowel, GI distress
- Rashes, breakouts
- Sore back and neck

#### Relational/Behavioral Warning Signs

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- Avoidance of patients
- Avoiding colleagues and staff gatherings
- Avoiding friends and social events
- Difficulty with sex and intimacy
- Engaging in frequent negative gossip/venting at work
- Feeling helpless when hearing a difficult story
- Frequent anger and irritability at home and/or at work
- Impaired ability to make decisions
- Impaired appetite or binge eating
- Impostor syndrome – feeling inadequate or like a “fraud” in your work, even though evidence suggests you are skilled
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Not returning phone calls at work and/or at home
- Problems in personal relationships
- Thinking about quitting your job
- Watching excessive amounts of TV/Netflix at night

#### Spiritual Warning Signs

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- Asking why a given situation has occurred
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling abandoned by God
- Feeling lost, without direction, or a sense of emptiness
- Feelings of anger or hopelessness
- Feelings of depression and anxiety
- Longing for spiritual help or guidance
- Questioning beliefs or sudden doubt in spiritual or religious beliefs
- Questioning the meaning of life or suffering

## Developing a Personal Warning System (continued)

Now that you have read through and identified your most frequent warning signs, try and identify your top *most frequent* signs from each category. For confirmation or insight, consider asking a close colleague or loved one what they think are your four most frequent warning signs.



Put your warning system together. Imagine a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the best that you have ever felt about your work/energy/resilience/life and 10 being the worst you have ever felt.)

Now consider your warning signs and how they indicate where you are on the scale “I notice I’m getting up to an 8, when I don’t return phone calls, I think about calling in sick a lot, and I am constantly speeding in the car.”

Being able to recognize that you are moving towards the red zone is an effective way to implement strategies before things get worse. If you know that you are getting close to a 7, you may take on less stressful cases, you may change your work schedule for a season, or you may return to seeing your therapist.

Also identify nourishing activities that help you be in the purple zone. These can be any intentional actions, big or little, that positively meet your physical, relational/behavioral, psychological/emotional, and spiritual needs. “I notice I’m moving towards a 4, when I have a vulnerable talk with a close friend, kindly say no to something, and make a healthy lunch for myself.”

**What warning signs are most active for you right now, in this time of life?**

**How are you balancing the things that nourish you with the things that deplete you?**

**Consider where you are on the scale. What is the next thing you could do in response to your personal warning system? If helpful, write it in the box below as a commitment with yourself:**

1. Southwick SMS, Charney DSD. *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; 2018.
2. Russell M, Brickell M. The “Double-Edge Sword” of Human Empathy: A Unifying Neurobehavioral Theory of Compassion Stress Injury. *Soc Sci*. 2015;4(4):1087-1117. doi:10.3390/socsci4041087.
3. Ryan MP. Spiritual Distress through the lens of Theism, Monism, and Humanism. 2011.
4. Skovholt TM. *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for Counselors, Therapists, Teachers, and Health Professionals*. Vol 23.; 2001. doi:10.1016/B978-075067929-9/50038-5.
5. Mathieu F. *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook : Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization*. Routledge; 2012.

\*Are you having suicidal or unrelenting hopeless thoughts? No matter how stressful and/or traumatic our work, it is not a common consequence to experience suicidal thoughts, prolonged depression, or hopelessness. Mission and Spiritual Care and Employee Assistance can help. If you are worried about confidentiality, please consult online sources of support. Don’t suffer alone. Get help. You deserve it and so do the people who love you.