

Matthew 9:36(a) tells us of Jesus, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them..." The word compassion is a very interesting word. It is not found in classical Greek (the language of the original New Testament). There was not a word the writer of Matthew could use to accurately describe what was happening. The idea behind the word compassion was the deepest of emotion. It was a yearning of the inner most part of Jesus' being to help. Today we might say His heart was almost ready to burst with passion and empathy for the suffering of the people.

Most pastors have a shepherd's heart and are often moved to compassion. They love their congregations, and want to protect them and help them grow. They are often involved in their community. When something tragic happens, they are usually the first to jump in to assist. Sometimes, a pastor may give so much of themselves to ministry that their marriage and family suffer. They are susceptible to burn out and compassion fatigue.

Ministers are often involved in helping people in the midst of tragedy. They often struggle in an arena between empathy and duty. Not managing our empathy well can leave us feeling overwhelmed. We may get where we are emotionally, mentally, and spiritually exhausted and have deep emotional pain. We may eventually find ourselves unable to even care anymore. This is called "Compassion Fatigue".

Compassion Fatigue is generally caused by exposure to those in crisis, and grief. It is not something that happens overnight. It is developed over time. This is accompanied by a deep physical, mental, and spiritual exhaustion, and often deep emotional pain. You are often absorbing the trauma through the eyes and ears of people you are trying to help.

A major component that makes people more susceptible to Compassion Fatigue is sleep deprivation. Clergy have a tendency to not get enough rest. Pastors are expected to do much more than conduct inspiring Sunday and Wednesday night services. The pastor often runs all the day to day administration, and maintenance of the church; makes hospital and home visits for the sick in their congregation; has a full schedule of counseling each week; performs weddings, funerals, and baby dedications; and responds in the middle of the night when there is an emergency such as an unexpected death. Add to that keeping up with e-mails, and weekly meetings - no wonder so many of us are overworked.

A recent study was conducted by LifeWay Research (lifeway.com, 12/28/09) to examine how Senior Pastors spend their week. The study found most full time Senior Pastors work an average of 55 hours per week or more. Out of 1000 pastors interviewed, 42% work an average of 60 hours per week or more, while 8% average 70 or more. Among those who are bi-vocational, the median number of hours worked is 30 hours per week. Those pastors who work a job in addition to, or to support their ability to be a pastor seem to follow the pattern set by the Apostle Paul. Paul was a "tentmaker by day and a preacher of the gospel by night."

Those most likely to get Compassion Fatigue include people involved in trauma work such as military personnel, law enforcement, E.M.T.s, emergency room nurses. Another group would be those who work with animals such as veterinarian staff who must euthanize pets. But it also affects clergy who may be involved in mercy ministries including pastors, missionaries, chaplains, and grief counselors.

Compassion fatigue and burnout have often been used interchangeably. But they are not the same. A vacation or change of job will usually cure or at least help burnout. Burnout is fairly predictable. It is cumulative. Compassion Fatigue seems to come out of nowhere and is less predictable.

The symptoms of Compassion Fatigue are very similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Some of the symptoms are:

1. Re-experiencing the traumatic event(s)
2. Persistent arousal
3. Difficulty sleeping
4. Job performance goes down
5. Generally more fatigued
6. Low tolerance for other people's pain (lack of compassion)
7. Drop in Morale
8. Personal relationships deteriorate
9. Decline in general health

Taking time off will help, but will probably not be enough. There are other things to do to help overcome Compassion Fatigue.

1. First, acknowledge there is a problem. If you suspect you have Compassion Fatigue, you probably do.
2. Take the time to care for yourself, and accept help.
3. Re-establish emotional resilience.
4. Watch your diet
5. Exercise
6. Get enough sunshine
7. Spend time with people you love. It has been shown that simply holding the hand of someone you love will lower blood pressure, the rate of your heartbeat, and reduce stress.

The next step involves self examination. You need to really get to know yourself again, and coming face to face with fear, anger, and maybe even self esteem issues. This is best done with the help of a good counselor, or a chaplain acquainted with Compassion Fatigue.

It's easier to prevent Compassion Fatigue than to repair it after it happens. There are some things you can do, and can make part of your routine to help prevent Compassion Fatigue:

- 1.** Get enough rest. Sleep deprivation is often a symptom, but it is also part of the problem and leads to many emotional and psychological issues.
- 2.** Have a quiet time every day. Use this time to pray, have devotional time, or just sit and think. Our society puts much too high a value on always being busy. We need to purpose to take time to do nothing.
- 3.** Take time daily to "recharge the batteries". This may involve exercise, taking a walk, and/or taking the time to eat while doing nothing else. Break the habit of eating on the run.
- 4.** Connect with people. Take the time everyday to have at least one meaningful conversation with a friend. Spending time with family or a close friend can work wonders in our lives. Unfortunately, time with friends and family is usually the first thing to go when we get too busy and too stressed.

We need to realize that we are vulnerable to the affects of being around too much grief. We all have different "triggers" or types of calls that affect us. If you are someone responding to a disaster such as the recent earthquakes in Haiti or Chile, or a terrorist attack, there is a much higher chance you will encounter more of these triggers.

Compassion Fatigue, also known as Second Hand Grief, can wrap around our shoulders like a heavy cloak. Try as we may, once it is on us, we can't always throw it off our shoulders. Our arms can become fatigued from trying to remove it. We need to know when we have had too much, and get help for ourselves.

In closing, remember to balance objectivity with empathy. When working with mercy ministries, you can't become so jaded and emotionless as to not have anything effect you, because then you can't be there for victims. You will come off as cold and detached. On the other hand, we can't be horrified and outraged at every call, or we will not be able to continue in this kind of ministry for long.