

ARE YOU TIRED? I'M TIRED.

An Exploration of Compassion Fatigue, Burnout
& Professional Resilience

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WHO IS THIS GUY?

- Born & raised in rural PA on lovely old farm
- Studied English in college and taught high school for 5 years
- Married a Seattle girl and realized in my late 20's that I wanted to go back to school
- Completed PhD in Maryland, studied Mindfulness, PTSD and Substance Abuse Treatment
- Began private practice in Anacortes in 2015 – serving individuals, couples & groups
- Invited in 2022, by the Bellingham Police Department, to come onboard as their first embedded mental health provider
- Now supporting leadership in developing, implementing, and evaluating our overarching approach and strategies towards officer wellness and resilience

WE HAVE A MERE 60 MINUTES TOGETHER,

- Lets Start with Some Semantics
- Comfortable Expert vs. Vulnerable Human - My Illness Story
- Why Do We Neglect & Forget Ourselves?
- Responding to / Learning to Dignify our Symptoms
- The Tendency to Resist Our Own Healing
- Lessons Learned Along the Way

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands.

Helpguide.org

Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others. The term compassion fatigue encompasses a more specific experience, which may be brought about by a stressful workplace or environment, lack of resources, or excessive hours.

Webmd.com

IDENTIFYING SYMPTOMS

How Do You Know When You're Struggling?

What shows up, in your body, as you begin to feel worn out, fatigued, exhausted, beat up by life?

Might Be Related To:

Kids, Work, Family, Partner, Money, etc.

Does it escalate? Do you know your pattern?



WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY?

1. I breathe more shallowly
2. Craving sweets
3. Brain fog
4. Stop taking my walks – cascade
5. Numbness
6. Stomach hurts
7. Migraines
8. Short fuse / irritability
9. Sleep disruptions
10. Jaw clenching / teeth grinding
11. Bad hygiene

What Do The Pros Say?

Canadian Medical Association – Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

1. feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of client / customer suffering
2. **reduced feelings of empathy and sensitivity**
3. **feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work demands**
4. **feeling detached, numb and emotionally disconnected**
5. **loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy**
6. **increased anxiety, sadness, anger and irritability**

I noted my own crazy in bold 😊

Symptoms Continued...

- 7. difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- 8. difficulty sleeping and sleep disturbances like nightmares
- 9. physical symptoms like headaches, nausea, upset stomach and dizziness
- 10.increased conflict in personal relationships
- 11.neglect of your own self-care
- 12.withdrawal and self-isolation
- 13.an increase in substance use as a form of self-medication

I scored 11 of 13, what do I win?

ITS NOT JUST YOU AND ME...

- More than 24% of Americans are now taking prescription mental health medication
- In 2019-2020, 20.78% of adults were experiencing a mental illness. That is equivalent to over 50 million Americans.
- Autoimmune diseases affect approximately one in ten individuals, and their burden continues to increase over time at varying rates across individual diseases.
- Between 1990 and 2017, the number of individuals with IBD increased from 3.7 million to more than 6.8 million, an increase of 85.1%. Worldwide it's estimated that 5-10% of the population has IBS.
- Nearly 70 million Americans have a sleep disorder

MINDSET

**WE LIVE
IN A TOXIC
CULTURE**



LINKING ILLNESS & ATTACHMENT

Does anyone feel comfortable taking a stab at defining attachment?

Why might attachment be so important in determining whether or not a culture is healthy or toxic?

ATTACHMENT THEORY

- Attachment theory focuses on the creation and role of relationships and bonds between people, including those **between a parent and child and between romantic partners**.
- This theory suggests that people are born with a need to forge bonds with caregivers as children. These early bonds may continue to have an influence on attachments throughout life.
- Throughout history, children who maintained proximity to an attachment figure were more likely to receive comfort and protection, and therefore more likely to survive to adulthood. Through the process of natural selection, a motivational system designed to regulate attachment emerged.

CONSIDERING ATTACHMENT PERSONALLY

Mike's Fancy Pants Definition:

1. Each child's attachment strategy is perfect.
2. Each of us gradually became a genius at securing the maximum love possible in our families, or...
3. We became geniuses at managing the pain and grief associated with not receiving the love and support we needed.
4. Thus, all attachment, is a sort of pretzel-ling to get needs met.
5. Or coping with the grief of not getting needs met, a distinct pretzel.



HOW I LEARNED THIS FOR MYSELF...MY ATTACHMENT

- Good hardworking blue collar parents
- A fairly conservative Catholic childhood
- Grew up on a hobby farm with lots of chores / projects
- My mother has PTSD secondary to her childhood trauma
- My father is a wonderful but very passive man, love = being nice

MY SPECIFIC PRETZEL

- Get good grades = Mom is proud, I'll get a good job.
- Work hard – and a lot! = Mom & Dad smile more, Mike gets praise.
- Go to church = God is proud, go to heaven, that's a win!
- Keep your room clean, be organized = Happier parents
- Be respectful, kind, conscientious = People like me more.
- Don't want too much / have too many needs = People smile less.

DECEMBER OF 2015 – ALL IS WELL

I left the VA, private practice was growing, kids were pooping in potties.

THEN A NEW HUMAN ARRIVES...

Goodbye to consistent sleep, having time for myself, spread much more thin...system begins to fall apart...

THEN WE BUY A PROPERTY

My crazy begins to ramp up, guess who feels inclined to
pick every apple & berry?

I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO STOP



WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

- Contrast of “on paper” success, with my health and mental health disaster
- A wonderful partner, three beautiful kids, an adorable 3-acre parcel
- I thought I was doing “everything right,” shouldn’t I feel good?
- And yet:
 - I wasn’t sleeping
 - I was irritable all the time
 - I felt profoundly trapped
 - I couldn’t digest food
 - I lost 30 pounds
 - I wasn’t sure I could continue to work or provide

The entire attachment style / pretzeling system was failing...

A PAINFULLY SLOW RECKONING

I had hit my bottom...

Recovery begins with acceptance

EXPLORATION OF OUR CORE BELIEFS

I had no idea how to be healthy

I didn't know how to say "no"

Love must be earned

I only had one gear - work hard

I was terrified of not having enough money

Self worth, mattering, is selfish

Must prove myself to have worth

I am not enough

Can I even change this?

STEP 1

Accept that your symptoms are not necessarily the problem, they are signals, flares, warnings, screams for help.



STEP 2

Admit that you likely will need some sort of help.

Not necessarily professional but could be:

- A. Therapy
- B. Massage
- C. Yoga
- D. Acupuncture
- E. Physical Therapy
- F. Chiropractor
- G. Dietician
- H. Trainer

Informal Support:

- A. Movement & Exercise
- B. Books
- C. Meditation Practice
- D. Wellness Apps
- E. Podcasts
- F. Increased Social Support
- G. Dance
- H. Community Theater

STEP 3

For long-term healing, your lifestyle will have to change.

For me, on my journey I had to:

1. Stop working nights and weekends
2. Create dedicated time for admin work, less clinical appointments
3. Commit to exercise time
4. Schedule regular body work appointments
5. Leave some insurance panels
6. And...sadly... though much better...this remains a work in progress

DON'T SWEAT THE RELAPSE

Rinse & Repeat – 2 steps forward, 1 step back

Monique healed me... for 3 months...

Working through relapse is a powerful way to learn about shame & resilience

LESSONS FROM THE JOURNEY

- We are in this together, no one ever “arrives,” all of us suffer.
- Physical and mental health symptoms are neither evidence of weakness, nor a problem to be solved; they are the bodies internal alarm system.
- By engaging our symptoms, studying them, working with them, one can find healing thought unimaginable.
- Learning to trust our symptoms requires an honest reckoning about why we haven’t before, what did we have to “not feel” in order to stay attached?

- We are not blaming anyone for our attachment style, most parents and guardians were simply doing their best, however, we must, as adults, learn how to attach to ourselves, to love and dignify ourselves first!
- Thank God I got so sick, how was I going to learn these lessons without going through this? I am trying hard to appreciate my symptoms despite all the “discomfort” they have forced me to examine.
- This is all occurred despite not having any “Capital T” trauma, only “little t;” as the trauma severity worsens (ACE scores), so does the extent of symptoms and the struggle to feel safe in an unsafe body.

THE BEST I KNOW

Gabor Mate

When the Body Says No
The Myth of Normal

Bessel Van Der Kolk

The Body Keeps the Score

Thich Nat Hahn

The Miracle of Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Wherever You Go, There You Are

Alice Miller

The Drama of the Gifted Child

Steven Levine

Healing Into Life & Death

The Traffic Signal Metaphor



Sleeping Well
Digestion is Good
Energy Levels Steady



Eating Poorly
Feeling Inflamed
Irritability
Less Exercise



Symptoms Worsening
Injuries
Diagnoses
Relationship Problems
Values Inconsistent Behavior