

Recognizing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Caregivers

Caring for a loved one can be meaningful and rewarding, but it can also be physically and emotionally demanding over time. Burnout and compassion fatigue are common experiences for caregivers and can develop gradually, especially when support is limited or stress is ongoing.

What are burnout and compassion fatigue?

While they are related, burnout and compassion fatigue are slightly different:

- Burnout often develops over time and is linked to ongoing stress, exhaustion, and feeling overwhelmed or depleted
- Compassion fatigue is more connected to the emotional impact of caring for someone who is suffering and can come on more suddenly

Both can affect how you feel, think, and function day to day.

How this may feel

You may notice:

- Feeling emotionally drained or “running on empty”
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Feeling detached, numb, or less connected
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Loss of motivation or enjoyment in things you once liked
- Feeling overwhelmed, even by small tasks

These are signs that your mind and body may be asking for rest and support.

How is this different from anxiety or depression?

Burnout and compassion fatigue can overlap with anxiety and depression, but they are not the same. They are often directly related to the caregiving role and ongoing stress. Symptoms may improve with rest, support, or changes in routine. You may still have moments where you feel like yourself, especially when you get a break. If symptoms feel constant, worsening, or affecting your ability to function, it may be helpful to talk with a healthcare provider.

Common contributing factors

- Long periods of caregiving without a break
- Feeling like you must do everything on your own
- Limited support from others
- Emotional strain of seeing a loved one struggle
- Balancing caregiving with work, family, or other responsibilities

Ways to support yourself

- Take small, intentional breaks: even short moments to step away, rest, or reset can help.
- Ask for and accept help: support can look like meals, errands, or simply someone sitting with your loved one.
- Stay connected: talking with someone you trust can help you feel less alone.
- Check in with yourself regularly: pause and ask, “what do I need right now?”
- Set realistic expectations: you don’t have to do everything perfectly.

A reminder about self-compassion

It’s easy to feel guilty for needing rest or feeling overwhelmed, but these reactions are human.

You might remind yourself:

- This is hard, and it makes sense that I feel this way
- Taking care of myself helps me show up for others
- I am doing the best I can in a difficult situation