

## May 2009 Podcast: Strength in Caring

### What is “Compassion Fatigue?”

- Compassion fatigue is often described in the context of burnout and stress.
- Compassion fatigue is defined as “state of exhaustion and dysfunction (biologically, psychologically and socially) as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress” (Figley, 1995).
- We become exhausted by the exposure to experience after experience of emotionally draining situations with clients who look to us for help.

### Why are renal professionals more likely to struggle with compassion fatigue and burnout?

- Individuals with ESRD come to us with many difficult problems.
  - They are often suffering from multiple medical conditions and significant psychosocial problems.
  - Then you factor in the fact that we have a longer term relationship with these individuals and we often become well-acquainted to them. If these boundaries aren’t handled properly we run the risk of getting overly involved emotionally in our patient’s lives.
- We work in a fast-paced environment that often times requires that we take short cuts or perhaps don’t pay as much attention to patient care as we would like to.
  - For many professionals this approach creates severe cognitive dissonance and they struggle with the competing thoughts of completing their job and completing their job in a manner that is most helpful to patients.
- Working in an area of medicine with a high mortality rate.
  - It is possible the high mortality rate in dialysis has something to do with compassion fatigue. The reality is that many of our patients die within a couple of years of initiating dialysis and if we don’t learn to monitor our reactions to this high mortality rate we could vicariously be grieving many deaths and this will take its toll.
- ATL conference
  - In August of this year the AKF is going to be sponsoring a professional conference in Atlanta that is designed specifically to address the emotional needs of the professionals who work in dialysis and transplant centers. Mark Meier will gather with many other distinguished professionals to talk about issues such as compassion fatigue, stress management, boundaries, recognizing depression in ourselves, and a host of other strategies for enhancing the well-being of those who do this challenging work.

### **What are some of the signs I might recognize in myself?**

- What of the most important things we can do as healthcare professionals is to monitor our own emotional well-being.
  - This can be difficult because we often don't take the time necessary to recognize how we are feeling, how we are acting, and how we are thinking about our job, the work we do, and the patients we take care of.
  - We need to take time and reflect on the work we do. When we identify the stressful aspects of our job then we can be better prepared to handle those situations the next time they come up.
  - We need to make sure that our personal values and ethics are in line with the way we are functioning at work. For example you might consider yourself a compassionate and empathic person, but if you find yourself being short or angry with patients there is a problem that needs to be looked at.
  - We should also be comfortable receiving feedback from our colleagues. They often have a clearer view of our behaviors than we do.
- There are several issues you should notice.
  - The first is your mood. If you find yourself feeling defeated, sad, or lacking any desire to go to work you should take a step back.
  - If you find yourself angry with your patients or blaming your patients this too is a red flag.
  - Other behavior issues might be that you aren't sleeping, you aren't eating properly, or you feel "keyed up" or on edge.

### **What can I do to help myself?**

- We need to take care of ourselves physically and emotionally.
  - When we are not getting adequate sleep or not eating properly we put ourselves at risk for experiencing stressful events in a more impactful manner.
  - Make the time to eat lunch and get adequate sleep.
- We need to be aware of our own moods and feelings.
  - If you find yourself feeling discontent, angry, or dissatisfied with your work, colleagues, or patients then it is important to understand why you are having these emotions.
  - Ask yourself, "What specifically about this situation is causing me to feel this way?"
- We need to respect and understand boundaries and ethics.
  - When we allow ourselves to become over involved in patient's lives we run a greater risk of experiencing compassion fatigue. This is because we are now taking care of our friends rather than our patients and over time this not only causes severe ethical and boundary issues, but will cause you greater emotional distress.
- Seek professional help when necessary.
  - When you find that your mood and attitude are waning and no matter what you do you can't pick yourself up; it might be time to speak with an

independent third party, such as a counselor or therapist. We all have bad days and frustrating moments at work, but compassion fatigue or even depression represent a more serious issue that should not be ignored.