

# Compassion Fatigue

## Section 3



In this article we will delve more deeply into the concept of compassion fatigue and the stages that we might experience if compassion fatigue is not addressed. As we face the complex reality of parenting, our ability to maintain an open and compassionate approach to our children can be challenged. Compassion fatigue can develop slowly overtime and go unrecognized. This article gives us insights that can guide us to avoid or stop compassion fatigue as early as possible.



Parenting is rewarding and also challenging. [Ross Greene](#), clinical child psychologist and respected author and trainer, refers to compassion fatigue quite simply as a decrease in a person's capacity to empathize with those who are suffering. Very few of us come to our role as parents knowing fully how to address the multiple expectations of preparing a child for life in the world, as well as all of the behavioral challenges that are presented to us by our children. These expectations can be overwhelming and can lead to burnout if measures are not taken to build skills, support resilience, and alleviate the symptoms.

**What does compassion fatigue look like?** What are the symptoms to look for early on to be able to minimize its impact and create (or return to) a path of resilience? Eric Gentry, PhD, offers a way to understand compassion fatigue in his staged model. Cat pictures were added to add some fun and assist with memory. First Stage Milwaukee, created this [fun video](#), set to the Overture from the musical Cats.

Developed in partnership with:



[compassionresiliencetoolkit.org](http://compassionresiliencetoolkit.org)

### Compassion Fatigue Cycle *(adapted from work of Eric Gentry, PhD, 2012)*

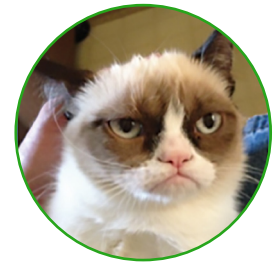


**Zealot/Idealist** – We are committed, involved, and available ... ready to problem solve ... ready to make a difference ... we willingly give it all we have ... our enthusiasm overflows ... we are willing to go the extra mile and often do so without prompting ... “I’ll do that!!”

*An example of the Zealot Stage – New parents promising to use only cloth diapers, make their own organic baby food, and stay up on all the parenting research. Also setting the expectation that you are going to love every part of parenting.*

**Irritability** – We begin to see the imperfect nature of the systems and people around us ... we distance ourselves from family, other parents and friends ... we begin to belittle our children, spouses, friends, etc. ... we talk unfairly and put down their efforts ... the use of humor is sometimes strained ... we become distracted when our children are speaking with us ... oversights and mistakes begin to occur. We may notice our anger, cynicism, diminished creativity, and sadness.

*An example of the Irritable Stage – You realize the expectations you set for yourself are not attainable. You become frustrated with others and frequently use sarcasm when responding to your children. You have a hard time giving your children your full attention.*



**Withdrawal** – We are unable to embrace the complexity of the problems ... we begin to see our children as irritants. ... complaints may be made about our efforts and we might have problems in our work life ... we are tired all the time ... we no longer wish to talk about our children and may not share our concerns with others ... we neglect our family, friends and ourselves ... our shield gets thicker and thicker to block our pain and sadness.

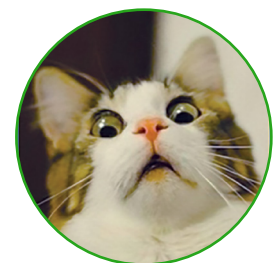
We may experience difficulty empathizing and may feel to numb to other’s pain.

*An example of the Withdrawal Stage – You are drained of energy and avoid your children when possible (lets others watch children as often as possible, use electronics excessively to distract the children when at home). You have feelings of sadness and have a hard time connecting with others.*

**Zombie** – Our hopelessness turns to rage ... we begin to hate people ... we get angry at our family and friends if they dare question us. ... others become incompetent or ignorant in our eyes ... we parent in a silo, without support from others ... we have no time for humor or fun.

We may have a sense that we can’t ever do enough, an inflated sense of importance related to our parenting, hyper-vigilance/ sleeplessness, and a sense of persecution.

*An example of the Zombie Stage – Feels you are the only one who can care for the family and their needs (laundry, cooking, cleaning) even though there are other capable family members available, you lose your temper with your family members often and never have fun.*



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**Renewal vs. Unwell** – If we have not addressed this cycle earlier, we come to a fork in the road where we either continue deeper into compassion fatigue to a place of poor health and victimization (overwhelmed and repeating the cycle, illness) or we take a turn towards renewal (hardiness, resiliency, transformation).

The good news is that at any stage in the cycle, one can learn skills and mindsets that change the path towards compassion satisfaction. The goal of the Parent and Caregiver Compassion

Resilience program is for us to learn these mindsets and skills in order to proactively address our ways of being to avoid compassion fatigue and, when it does arise, address it early with confidence and support. It is beneficial to begin by getting a sense of the starting place for ourselves.

### SELF-CARE



### STRATEGIES

#### Want More Energy? Consider Gratitude!

Practicing being grateful, among many other benefits, increases your energy. You can start now by thinking of three things for which you are grateful. Then choose a time of day, every day, to set your mind on gratitude. Give it time, enjoy exploring gratefulness and see if you too find added energy for the important work you do. Liza Long, is a mother of a child with mental health challenges. Here are [her thoughts](#) on gratitude.



### WHAT'S NEXT

#### System Drivers of Compassion Fatigue