



The Edge of Compassion

Staying Well While Working in Oncology

Participant Resources

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Contributing Factors

IDENTIFYING WORK-RELATED STRESS

The first step to managing experiences of work-related stress is to identify its source. The Contributing Factors framework can help you to understand your risk factors for developing burnout, secondary traumatic stress, empathic strain, moral distress, and other related challenges.

This framework covers seven domains of potential risk-factors: Personal Circumstances, Work-Related Grief & Loss, Direct Exposure, Indirect Exposure, System Challenges, Working Conditions, and Socio-Cultural Context.



This tool was developed by Françoise Mathieu, TEND, Leslie Ann Ross, UCLA, and the Secondary Traumatic Stress Consortium, a group of researchers, trainers, practitioners, and advocates with a common goal to advance the field of secondary traumatic stress towards health. Special thanks to R. Cuellar, A. Hendricks, M. Clarke, and G. Sprang of the National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network (NCSTN) for contributing the Socio-Cultural Context circle.

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Everyone has a life story that shapes who they are. This life story can be a source of strength, comfort, and resilience during challenging times. However, this life story can also amplify work-related stress.

Personal circumstances include factors such as your history, coping style, and personality. These may impact your ability to manage stress. For example, many professionals are part of the “sandwich generation,” meaning that they care for both young children and aging parents.

Factors related to your personal circumstances might include:

- having a history of childhood adversity
- navigating a challenging family crisis (such as a custody dispute, divorce, fertility crisis, financial stress, etc.)
- providing care for someone with significant needs
- facing significant mental health or physical health challenges

What personal factors are adding to your work-related pressures?

What personal factors are a source of strength?

WORK-RELATED GRIEF & LOSS

Grief and loss in the workplace are unfortunate realities. These feelings can surface during times of “unfinished business” – such as when someone you know passes away (anticipated or sudden), or when an individual/client/patient unexpectedly terminates services.

You may also experience grief and loss during times of disruption in your workplace including:

- A colleague or mentor being fired, dismissed, retiring, or unexpectedly leaving the workplace
- missing out on career development or social bonding due to public health restrictions and the impact of the pandemic
- losing essential funding or experiencing significant budget cuts
- experiencing a work-related tragedy

How have your expectations for your work or career been impacted by the pandemic?

What strategies do you have to help process feelings of grief and loss?

DIRECT EXPOSURE

Experiencing direct exposure means that a traumatic event is happening directly to you or in front of you. During these situations, your personal safety might be at risk, someone may be seriously injured, or you may experience feelings of terror or horror.

There are two potential sources of direct exposure:

Sources from your **personal life** such as:

- being a victim of a crime or other traumatic event
- seeking asylum in a new country
- experiencing a serious medical crisis (either yourself or a loved one)

Sources from your **professional** life such as:

- being involved in a dangerous and/or escalated situation
- witnessing a traumatic event
- being threatened or assaulted at work

What strategies do you have to help you manage these difficult experiences?

INDIRECT EXPOSURE

Indirect exposure means that you experience a traumatic event second-hand. These are the stories, feelings, and thoughts that haunt you or seem to “hitch a ride with you” after hearing, seeing, or reading about them.

The terms *secondary trauma* and *vicarious trauma* both describe experiences of indirect exposure.

Indirect exposure can be caused by situations such as:

- working with people who have experienced tragedy and hearing graphic details of the event
- reading case files
- having colleagues debrief a disturbing case with you

With the ready availability of social media and internet, many of us inadvertently add to our levels of indirect trauma exposure every day. From disturbing news coverage to graphic TV shows, this frequent deluge of exposure can be insidious and hard to pinpoint.

Take a trauma-input survey of your work and personal life. What are sources of secondary trauma exposure that you encounter (or may encounter) in your work?

Are there experiences of unnecessary exposure in your life that you can reduce?

SYSTEM CHALLENGES

System challenges refer to the “red-tape” or roadblocks that prevent professionals from offering the best possible care or services. Examples of system challenges include:

- large amounts of seemingly extraneous or tedious paperwork
- navigating long waiting lists or convoluted systems for the people you serve
- disagreements about who should be eligible for a certain service
- barriers to arranging appropriate services for under-served populations

One result of facing these challenges is moral distress. Moral distress occurs when you are told to do things that you fundamentally disagree with, are morally opposed to, or when your values conflict with what is required by law, rules, or regulations.

What are the areas of "red-tape" that you experience in your work?

WORKING CONDITIONS

This refers to how you experience or perceive the conditions of your workplace including your relationship with your supervisor and colleagues, perception of fairness and appreciation (salary, rewards, benefits, vacation time etc.), and your workload.

Poor working conditions are often a primary source of burnout.

The quality of your working conditions can be impacted by:

- your sense of trust in leadership
- the quality and timeliness of communication within your organization
- the degree to which you feel you are fairly compensated for the work that you do.

Have you experienced burnout? If so, what were the main contributors?

Thinking of your career, what elements of your working conditions are non-negotiable? (i.e., friendly co-workers, flexibility with your hours, compensation, etc.)

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The term socio-cultural context refers to the intersection of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, historical trauma, and other elements that define your identity. These factors may come into daily collision with the socio-political factors of your community including the rules, regulations, laws, and political climate of where you live and work.

Factors related to socio-cultural context include:

- a current crisis or cultural shift that personally impacts you and your way of life
- being asked to do tasks outside of your scope of work because of your race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, etc.
- a lack of representation of your race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, etc. within your workplace or profession

Can you anticipate moments when your own socio-cultural context may collide with your work?
What will help?

Reflecting on Your Physical & Psychological Resilience

INSTRUCTIONS

Use an "X" to indicate those things that you **often do**.

Skip over or leave blank those things that **you rarely do or wish you did more often**.

MOVEMENT & PHYSICAL HEALTH

- ☐ I eat regularly, eating when hungry and stopping when full.
- ☐ I maintain a healthy weight.
- ☐ I eat lots of vegetables and fruits throughout the day.
- ☐ I choose whole grains, non-processed fruits, and limit my sugar intake.
- ☐ I have healthy snacks with me in my office, on the road, and at home.
- ☐ I drink at least 8 cups of fluid (water or other healthy options) throughout my day.
- ☐ I use the stairs whenever possible.
- ☐ I walk or cycle to meetings, appointments, and other outings whenever possible.
- ☐ I use work breaks or lunchtime to stretch, go for a walk, or take an exercise class.
- ☐ I do activities that strengthen my muscles, bones, and improve posture 2-3 times a week.
- ☐ I do stretching and balancing activities 2-3 times a week.
- ☐ I accumulate 150 minutes of active living/increased heart rate every week.
- ☐ I get regular preventative and required health care.
- ☐ I do physical activities that I find fun.
- ☐ I make sure to get enough sleep.
- ☐ I limit the amount of screen time that I engage in.
- ☐ I take regular vacations or time off.
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

This exercise was adapted from Saakvitne, K. W., & Pearlman, L. A. (1996). *Transforming the pain: A workbook on vicarious traumatization*. W.W. Norton and Loehr, J., & Schwartz, T. (2003). *The power of full engagement: Managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal*. Free Press.

LEARNING

- ☐ I play challenging games or puzzles.
- ☐ I am curious and like to learn new things.
- ☐ I break out of my normal routine or do things that are out of my comfort zone.
- ☐ I read literature that is unrelated to work.
- ☐ I do things that I am not an expert at or in charge of.
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

CONNECTION

- ☐ I practice deep breathing during stressful times like short deadlines, traffic jams, etc.
- ☐ I have people I can share things with.
- ☐ I practice receiving from others.
- ☐ I nurture intimate relationships.
- ☐ I deal with situations directly.
- ☐ I take time for myself every day.
- ☐ I volunteer for something that I feel is worthwhile.
- ☐ I see the class as half full, rather than half empty.
- ☐ I know when and how to say "no."
- ☐ I accept other people's differences and the things I cannot change.
- ☐ I treat myself with loving kindness as I would speak to someone I care about.
- ☐ I allow myself to cry or feel emotional when needed.
- ☐ I smile and laugh daily.
- ☐ I engage in play regularly.
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

MEANING & VALUES

- ☐ I take time to self-reflect.
- ☐ I am curious and like to learn new things.
- ☐ I have a sense of purpose in life.
- ☐ I seek to make a contribution in life.
- ☐ I have hope.
- ☐ I am aware of the non-material aspects of life.
- ☐ I identify what is meaningful to me and notice its place in my life.
- ☐ I take time to meditate, pray, or contemplate.
- ☐ I have experiences of awe.
- ☐ I connect with things larger than myself (e.g., nature, community, etc.)
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

REFLECTION

Which area(s) of your physical and psychological resilience would you like to improve? How do you think improving that area would benefit your work or personal life?

Choose one statement that you left blank. Make a commitment to incorporate that activity into your day.

Today, I will: _____

Your "Big Three" Warning Signs

INSTRUCTIONS

Use an "X" to indicate the warning signs that you experience when you are approaching your "red zone."

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- ☐ Physical exhaustion
- ☐ Difficulty sleeping (insomnia and/or oversleeping)
- ☐ Headaches and/or migraines
- ☐ Jaw clenching
- ☐ Reflux and heartburn
- ☐ Gastrointestinal issues (e.g., IBS, diarrhea, etc.)
- ☐ Frequent colds or sickness
- ☐ Somatization (when emotional stress is felt in the body, such as stress-induced nausea)
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- ☐ Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- ☐ Addictive behaviours (shopping, gambling, binge eating, video games, TV, etc.)
- ☐ Absenteeism (missing work)
- ☐ Presenteeism (physically at work, but mentally checked out)
- ☐ Attrition (quitting your job or taking extended sick leave)
- ☐ Anger and irritability
- ☐ Avoidance of clients, patients, or individuals that you support
- ☐ Impaired ability to make decisions
- ☐ Problems in personal relationships

Sources: Saakvitne (1995), Figley (1995), Gentry, Baranowsky, & Dunning (1997), Yassen (1995). This exercise was adapted from Mathieu, F. (2012). *The Compassion fatigue workbook: Creative tools for transforming compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization*. Routledge.

YOUR "BIG THREE" WARNING SIGNS

- ☐ Compromised care for clients, patients, or individuals that you support
- ☐ Forgetfulness
- ☐ Workaholism (inability to unplug after work, working more hours than required)
- ☐ Imposter syndrome
- ☐ Engaging in the "siliencing response" (e.g., redirecting, shutting down, minimizing, or neglecting things that our clients or patients are telling us) (Baranowsky & Gentry, 2006).
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

PSYCHOLOGICAL OR EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- ☐ Emotional exhaustion
- ☐ Distancing
- ☐ Negative self-image
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- ☐ Cynicism
- ☐ Dread of working with certain clients, patients, or individuals that you support
- ☐ Feeling professional helplessness
- ☐ Depersonalization or dissociation (feeling disconnected from the world around you)
- ☐ Disruption of world view
- ☐ Difficulties with intimacy
- ☐ Intrusive thoughts and images
- ☐ Heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- ☐ Feeling extra sensitive to emotionally charged stories, movies, music, etc.
- ☐ Feeling numb to emotionally charged stories, movies, music, etc.
- ☐ Feeling vulnerable
- ☐ Difficulty separating work and home life
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Other: _____

YOUR "BIG THREE" WARNING SIGNS

Now that you have read through and highlighted your warning signs, identify your top three most frequent warnings signs.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

REFLECTION

Do your top three warning signs all fall within one domain (either physical, behavioural, or emotional)? Or do you see a mixture of signs from each?

Reflecting on today, would you say that you are currently in the green (healthy), yellow (warning sign) or red zone with your overall functioning?

Now, ask a loved one or close colleague to share with you what they think your “Big Three” warning signs are – they may be delighted to tell you.

Recommended Resources



ARTICLES

Coming Home to Secondary Traumatic Stress by Françoise Mathieu, 2020

Disappoint Someone Today by Françoise Mathieu, 2018

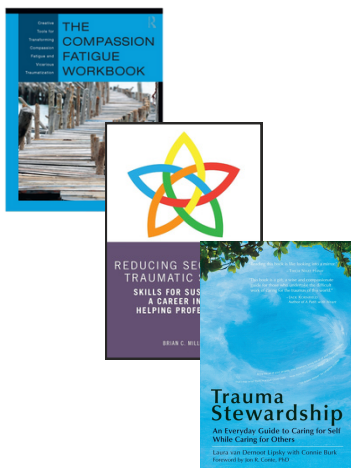
This is a Marathon, Not A Sprint: Strategies to Address Wear & Tear by Françoise Mathieu, 2020

BOOKS

The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization by Françoise Mathieu, 2012

Reducing Secondary Traumatic Stress: Skills for Sustaining a Career in the Helping Professions by Brian Miller, 2022

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009



VIDEOS

"The Edge of Compassion" TEDx Talk with Françoise Mathieu, 2018

VISIT THE TEND TOOLKIT FOR MORE RESOURCES



WWW.TENDTOOLKIT.COM

ARTICLES

- **Beyond Kale and Pedicures: Can We Beat Burnout & Compassion Fatigue?** by Françoise Mathieu | <https://tendtoolkit.com/beyond-kale-and-pedicures/>
- **We Need to Talk: Why There Can Be No "Future Forward" Until We've Done the Work** by Françoise Mathieu | <https://tendtoolkit.com/we-need-to-talk/>
- **This is a Marathon, Not a Sprint: Understanding Reactivity & Staying Grounded (Part Two)** by Françoise Mathieu | <https://tendtoolkit.com/marathon-not-a-sprint-part-two/>
- **Breathe, Reset, Refuel, Rinse, Repeat** by Françoise Mathieu | <https://tendtoolkit.com/breathe-reset-refuel/>
- **Today, Spare a Thought for the Call Centre Operators** by Françoise Mathieu | <https://www.tendatoolkit.com/call-centre-operators/>

BOOKS

- **The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul** by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, 2018 | <https://traumastewardship.com/inside-the-book-2/>
- **The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It** by Jennifer Moss, 2021 | <https://www.jennifer-moss.com/books>
- **Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World** by Cal Newport, 2016 | <https://www.calnewport.com/books/deep-work/>
- **Reducing Secondary Traumatic Stress: Skills for Sustaining a Career in the Helping Professions** by Brian Miller, 2021 | <https://www.routledge.com/Reducing-Secondary-Traumatic-Stress-Skills-for-Sustaining-a-Career-in-the/Miller/p/book/9780367494575>
- **Quick Calm: Easy Meditations to Short-Circuit Stress Using Mindfulness and Neuroscience** by Jennifer Wolkin, 2021 | <https://www.quickcalmbook.com>
- **Resilience, Balance & Meaning Workbook** by Dr. Patricia Fisher, 2016 | <https://www.tendacademy.ca/product/e-book-building-resilient-teams/>
- **Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself** by Nedra Glover Tawwab, 2021 | <https://www.nedratawwab.com/set-boundaries-find-peace-1>
- **The Stress Prescription: 7 Days to More Joy and Ease** by Elissa Epel, 2022 | <https://www.elissaepel.com/the-stress-prescription>

PODCASTS & AUDIO

- **Beyond Self Care with Francoise Mathieu, M.Ed.** The Trauma Therapist Project | <https://www.thetraumatheapistproject.com/podcast/beyond-self-care-with-francoise-mathieu-med>
- **A Chat with Françoise Mathieu about Anxiety and Other Things.** Just Us on Justice and Other Things | <https://www.spreaker.com/user/16522226/season-2-episode-1-a-chat-with-franciose>
- **This is a Marathon, Not a Sprint: Pacing Yourself Through the Pandemic.** One in Ten | <https://www.buzzsprout.com/280046/3463774-this-is-a-marathon-not-a-sprint-pacing-yourself-through-the-pandemic>
- **There is No One Magic Bullet with Françoise Mathieu.** Psychological Safety in the Workplace | <https://www.psychhealthandsafetycanada.com/episodes/there-is-no-one-magic-bullet>

OTHER

- **The 4A's to Rise Above Moral Distress**, American Association of Critical Care Nurses | https://www.emergingrnleader.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/4As_to_Rise_Above_Moral_Distress.pdf
- **Circle of Influence Exercise**, Then Somehow | <https://www.thensomehow.com/circles-of-influence/>
- **Just One Thing: Simple Practices for Resilient Happiness**, Rick Hanson | <https://www.rickhanson.net/writings/just-one-thing/>
- **The TEND Toolkit: A Library of Tools for Helping Professionals** | www.tendtoolkit.com
- **TEND** | www.tendacademy.ca
- **Workplace Strategies for Mental Health**, Canada Life | <https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com>