

# Thought Leaders: Patricia Smith Discusses Compassion Fatigue in Today's Caregiver Climate

This month we are sharing an earlier Thought Leaders interview with Patricia Smith about compassion fatigue, given the significant impact COVID-19 continues to have on caregivers across the spectrum, from hospital staff to family caregivers. We are reminded of Patricia's interview and wanted to share it at a time when it could be so helpful to so many.

Patricia graciously agreed to us re-running her 2017 feature article, and was kind enough to write a new introduction. Many thanks to Patricia for her continued contributions to the field and in caregiver communities! Now, let's hear from Patricia about compassion fatigue in today's caregiver climate.



*As I write this addition to the 2017 interview on compassion fatigue and caregivers, our world is in the grips of COVID-19. This pandemic has created worldwide confusion, anger, pain and suffering. My work over the past 20 years has been focused on caregivers in all of the helping professions, and family caregivers, as well. Now, with the trauma created by the virus, I consider all of us caregivers. Who hasn't run errands for their elderly parents? Who hasn't shopped*

*and delivered the groceries to their elderly, ill or disabled neighbors? Who hasn't sewn masks to be given out to their community members? Who hasn't worked diligently in lockdown*

*to prepare nutritious meals for themselves and their family members? Who hasn't advocated what's right and life-affirming on Facebook, Twitter and other social media? These, and many more actions and behaviors, define care-giving. It is more important than ever that each one of us begin our healing process. As difficult as that is in the eye of the hurricane, it is imperative if we hope to return to a healthy level of wellness, happiness and good health. Find time in each day for authentic self-care. Take a walk in nature, paint a picture, meditate, practice yoga, listen to music that stirs your soul, bake a cake and give half to someone who is weathering the storm alone, plant a vegetable garden, or sit in silence and be thankful for the good that remains in your life. All of these strategies define and promote healing.*

*Stay safe. Patricia*

## **2017 Thought Leaders Interview with Patricia Smith on Compassion Fatigue**

**Magellan:** Thank you for taking the time to participate in our virtual interview. Can you share with our readers some background regarding your interest and leadership in the area of compassion fatigue and burnout in the mental health and wellness field?

**Patricia Smith:** I first learned about compassion fatigue as the training and development manager at Humane Society Silicon Valley. After many years as a journalist, I decided I wanted to work with animals. Within the first two weeks in my new job, the executive director asked me to create a shelter-wide compassion fatigue training. I had never heard the term, and the only information I could find was the academic work of Dr. Charles Figley, who was then the director of the Traumatology

Institute at Florida State University. I contacted Dr. Figley and he brought me through the process of understanding exactly what compassion fatigue is and how to address the symptoms. At that same time, I took the Professional Quality of Life Self-Test ([https://www.proqol.org/ProQol\\_Test.html](https://www.proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html)) created by Dr. Beth Hudnall Stamm, who also became a mentor. The test revealed that I suffered from very high levels of compassion fatigue. This started me on a journey that has lasted the past 20 years. After several years on my own personal healing journey, I created the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#) in hopes of helping others in the helping professions to understand compassion fatigue and how high levels can devastate a caregiver's life. The scope of my work has grown beyond anything I could have imagined.

**Magellan:** You have done a great deal of work looking at aspects of compassion fatigue and burnout. What have you learned over the course of this work, and what recommendations would you make to peers to support their own wellness and to avoid compassion fatigue?

**Patricia Smith:** My own work has dovetailed with the amazing work being accomplished by professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists in the field of traumatology and neuroscience. Powerful new information has come about from studies of the effect of trauma on our Wounded Warriors. Post-traumatic stress disorder is now a common phrase and the understanding of trauma on the human body, mind and spirit is widespread. These studies have branched out to include brain studies and how traumatic events impact our brains – and, more important, what we can do about it.

If, indeed, a caregiver suffers a high level of compassion fatigue, which is a secondary traumatic stress syndrome, the best path to take for healing is authentic, sustainable self care. The practices that promote wellness encompass the Standards of Self-Care: nutritious food, exercise, restful sleep, highly functional relationships and replacing toxic

habits (smoking, alcohol, drugs, overeating, pornography, etc.) with healthy, life-affirming habits.

**Magellan:** Your studies/work around compassion fatigue and personal wellness are of particular interest to our readers, given their work in peer support. How can we influence modifiable lifestyle behaviors to improve individual well-being and battle compassion fatigue?

**Patricia Smith:** Re-wiring our brains to successfully improve the quality of our own lives takes work – lots of work. Healing is an inside job. We must go back in time to heal the wounds we have endured throughout our lives; one of the main causes of compassion fatigue is holding unresolved pain and suffering within. This takes a toll emotionally, but is well-worth the journey. The work involved in healing our wounds is nothing compared to the time, energy and emotional pain it takes to hold them at bay. Everything that has ever happened to us lives within. Pushing down the memories or ignoring them constantly elevates levels of compassion fatigue. Every time we experience additional trauma in our lives, which today is perpetrated everywhere – Facebook, TV news, newspapers– the new trauma hooks into the trauma that already exists. This pattern continues day after day in the helping professions and, eventually, a caregiver will become paralyzed with compassion fatigue. Businesses and organizations can do their part in helping caregivers to modify their lifestyles by educating their employees about compassion fatigue and putting healthy alternatives into place. This could include an edict wherein no business (emails, texts, phone calls) is conducted on weekends or evenings, encouraging mandatory vacations, providing healthy food alternatives in the cafeteria or vending machines, creating walking or biking groups, and other positive encouragement to promote wellness.

*Patricia Smith is a certified compassion fatigue specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#)®, she writes, speaks*

*and facilitates trainings nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has presented to caregivers in numerous helping professions including social work, health care, law enforcement, chaplain services, suicide prevention and education, among many others. She has authored several books and training materials for caregivers, including the award-winning To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving. She served as the caregiving expert for Spry magazine for several years. In September 2016, she presented a TEDx talk on the subject. Additionally, she was the 2012 and 2013 recipient of a writing fellowship at the Helen R. Whiteley Center, in Friday Harbor, Washington, a scholarly research center sponsored by the University of Washington in Seattle.*

This is an excerpt from the Magellan Healthcare *eMpowered for Wellness* September newsletter. To read the full article, go [here](#).