

Chapter 11

Step One: Take Stock— Track Your Stressors at Home and at Work

I started to look at the things on my plate and realized it was overflowing, so I made some changes. I spoke with the priest at the church where I am an honorary assistant and explained that I needed a break from celebrating, preaching, and leading Bible study and retreats. I also decided I needed to exercise and focus on keeping myself well, so I bought a treadmill to walk three times a week. I established a transition from work to home. However, the most beneficial thing I did was to begin to share my story with someone I trusted.

—From a hospital chaplain

In this chapter you are invited to:

- Explore the best ways to track your stress levels in your daily life, both at home and at work
- Take some of these activities back to your workplace and discuss with colleagues

Compassion fatigue specialists are unequivocal: the key strategies to tackle compassion fatigue (CF) and vicarious traumatization (VT) are deceptively simple. What they require first and foremost is a willingness to take an honest look at ourselves.

Anyone who has attended my workshops will know that “taking stock” is one of my favorite recommendations. Most of us spend far too much time racing around in our busy lives without stopping to take an internal inventory of how we are actually feeling.

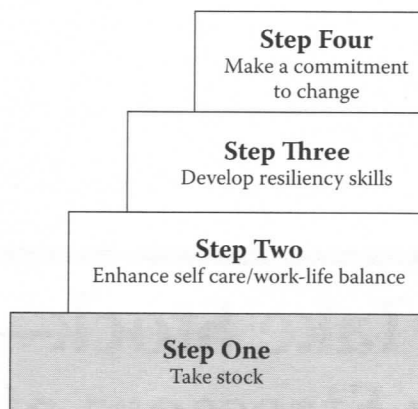


Figure 11.1

I have a client who is chronically overwhelmed—a true type-A workaholic. She once told me that she refuses to make to-do lists because they end up making her feel hopeless and discouraged. I have heard the same from clients who are deeply in debt. They will simply stop answering the phone as a way to deal with the creditors calling. We cannot do this with self-care and hope to stay in the field for the long haul. Something has got to give. Taking stock is therefore important.

Tracking Your Physical Well-Being

For me compassion fatigue is very much a physical experience due to my overactive fight/flight system that has symptoms of racing heart rate, breath, and thoughts. Because of this I really need to focus on physical outlets that release the adrenaline in my revved-up system but also lead by thoughts to refocus so I can relax. For me this means regular walks in the woods and, above all, ongoing yoga practice. As I have to concentrate on twisting my body into various pretzel shapes, it does not leave room for my thoughts to be intruded upon by my clients. In fact, my favorite part of yoga has now become shavasana or corpse pose at the end of my routine because it is only through yoga that I can create a truly quiet mind sometimes for 3 whole minutes. I have also found it useful to visualize my yoga routines when I cannot sleep, which helps me keep out the intrusive thoughts that are interrupting my sleep, and because I am focusing on a calming experience, it triggers my body to relax and turn off the fight/flight survival system.

—Diana Tikasz, social worker

WHERE TO FIND THE FULL BODY-SCAN EXERCISE

Web: Through Google, I was able to find several audio and scripted body scan exercises in a matter of seconds. Here is a free body scan exercise script and audio: <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/activities/body-scan>

CD: *Creating Inner Calm* by Mark Berber (only available at Indigo/Chapters, not Amazon)

Books: Bourne, E.J. (2000). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, Oakland: New Harbinger.

Do you have a good sense of how you are feeling physically today? Is there a part of your body that you have been neglecting or that has been causing you pain or discomfort lately? Have you recently had a medical checkup, dental exam, eyes checked?

The *body scan* is a very effective exercise from the field of relaxation training and stress reduction. The full version of the body scan encourages you to focus on each part of your body one after the other, to identify where you are holding tension. This process is normally done lying down, in a quiet room. There are examples of the full body scan in the shaded box above.

If time does not allow you to do the full scan, you can also carry out a modified version of the body scan:

Sitting in a quiet, peaceful room, close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Notice what is happening in your body: Working your way down from the top of your head, notice how your jaw, neck, and shoulders are feeling at this moment. Remember to keep breathing, and if your mind wanders, gently bring it back. If that is all the time you have, take three slow, deep breaths through your nose and gently open your eyes. If you have more time, work your way down your body, noticing how your shoulders, arms, stomach, calves, and toes feel right now.

Tracking and Limiting Your Trauma Inputs

Do you work with clients who have experienced trauma? Do you read about and see photos of and are generally exposed to difficult stories and images at your work? Take a survey of the trauma inputs of a typical day in your life. Starting at home, what does your day begin with? Watching morning news on TV? Listening to the radio or reading the paper? Note how many disturbing images, difficult stories, or actual photos of dead or maimed people you come across.

Now look at your work. Not counting direct client work, how many difficult stories do you hear, whether it be in a case conference, around the water cooler debriefing a colleague, or reading files?

Now turn your attention to your return trip home. Do you listen to the news on the radio? Do you watch TV at night? What do you watch? If you have a spouse who is also in the helping field, do you talk shop and debrief each other?

It is important to recognize the amount of trauma information that we unconsciously absorb during the course of a day. Many helpers say that they are unable to watch much of anything on television anymore, other than perhaps the cooking channel. Others say the reverse: they are so desensitized that they will watch very violent movies and shows and feel numb when others around them are clearly disturbed by it.

In our day-to-day life, we are exposed to a lot of extra trauma input outside of client work. We do not necessarily need to hear about all of these disturbing stories in graphic detail. We can create a “trauma filter” to protect ourselves from this extraneous material. (The idea of a “trauma filter” is discussed in Chapter 14 on developing compassion fatigue resilience.)

A great way to track your stressors is with the exercise called “what’s on your plate,” below.

EXERCISE: WHAT’S ON YOUR PLATE?

Some of the questions were inspired by Cheryl Richardson’s book *Take Time for Your Life*.¹

Take a blank sheet of 8½ by 11 paper and draw a large dinner plate on it.

1. In your plate, write all the things you do/are responsible for, roles, jobs, responsibilities, life needs and issues presently. Write as many concrete details as possible. Think of a typical day in your life from start to finish (e.g., get up, make lunches for kids, make breakfast, clean up, call plumber, drive to work).
2. Look at the things within the plate you *would like to change and underline them* (don’t worry whether or not they are actually changeable in reality at the moment).
3. Look at the things that are changeable at the moment *even by just 1% and circle these*. Think about what a 1% change could look like: If my goal is to improve my eating and lose 40 pounds, adding one apple per day to my diet could be a 1% change. If I want to start exercising, running a marathon would be a 100% change, walking around the block twice a week would be a 1% change.
4. On the outside of the plate, write down things you *wish you had more time for*.
5. When you had more time, perhaps when you were in high school or college, were there leisure activities you used to enjoy but have lost touch with (running, swimming, reading, singing, crafts)?

6. Think about why/how you did these things in the past.
7. Reflect on why you are not doing them now (or a 1% version of them—if you used to be a competitive figure skater, you may now enjoy skating once a week for fun?).

Ask yourself how can you make choices to integrate the things you wish you had more time for in your life now.

GO FURTHER²

Choose one thing on your plate that you can delegate, say no to, back out of, or make one small step toward. For example, you have agreed to have your partner's family for a large family dinner and you identify this as the one thing on your plate you wish you could have said no to. Take 10 minutes to yourself and brainstorm every option you can think of, no matter how silly or unrealistic. Force your inner critic to sit out; when he or she starts to say, "No, you can't do that," tell her or him to be quiet while you finish the exercise. Your brainstorm list could be to call everyone back and tell them that you have a huge bug problem and the exterminator will be there; call and ask everyone to bring a dish rather than making dinner yourself; call and ask if this could be moved to another week after being honest about how tired you are feeling; ask your partner to make dinner for the family while you go out on the town with friends you haven't seen in a long time.

As you re-read your answers, and hopefully some of them are more outrageous than you would normally be, check your responses. For example, how did it feel to read the last one? Most of the helpers we work with have said that they would *never* back out of something they offered to do unless it was a life-or-death problem. Well, what does that say to your body? It says to your body, "Create a life-or-death problem for me so I can get out of things I don't want to do." Now you are really in a fix because your compassion fatigue may also be preventing you from standing up for yourself.

REDUCING YOUR STRESS—TRYING TO SAY NO (OR YES)

If you have gone through your schedule and there really isn't even one area that could be lightened by even 1%, then it is time to, at the very least, stop taking on more.

Say no to everything that is requested of you for 1 week. I am not suggesting that you say no altogether, but always ask for time to think about it first. For bigger commitments, always ask for a night to sleep on it. For example, when someone asks me if I'm interested in taking on a new project, writing a new workshop, or presenting in a new city, I always take the time to think it over. In every circumstance I have been able to say something like, "That sounds

really interesting; let me take a look at my calendar,” or, “Let me talk to my partner and get back to you tomorrow or next week.” If someone asks you to do something you are really game to do and you want to say yes—before you say yes, check in with your body and note how you feel. Through listening to your body you will be able to trust it to help you prioritize.

Go back to the “what’s on your plate” exercise and quickly choose three things you wish you could change—any three items. Now, look critically at these three items and, for each one, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Is this something I have even a tiny bit of control over? (Some of the helpers we work with have chronic illnesses like diabetes. While they may not feel that they can control having diabetes, many have identified ways that they can honor their bodies and care for them more respectfully. For example: I will increase the number of fruits and vegetables that I eat every day.)
2. What would change in my life if this issue were to go away?
3. What 10% change could I make in this area?

Did one item stand out for you more than others—either because it would have the most positive impact on your life or because it would be the easiest area to change right away to give you an experience of success? Highlight the one item that you wish to work on. For example, many people begin with something like physical health, sleep, or beginning a stress reduction program rather than choosing an item that involves another person, since that adds another element you may not be in control of. This does not mean that making more time to spend with friends and family is not a great goal; just make it open enough so that you are not stuck if one person cannot make the commitments you want to make.

Now ask yourself the most important question of this exercise:

On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being “I’m willing to move mountains to make a change in this area” and 1 being “I wouldn’t be willing to lift a finger,” where are you today, with this particular item? Ask yourself the question again in terms of this whole project, your own compassion fatigue, and improved self-care.

Getting the Wake-Up Call

What would it take for you to make serious changes to your schedule and self-care routine? A health scare? The illness or death of a close family member? Going on stress leave?

When my children were very young, I remember speaking to a colleague who was in her late 50s, and she said to me: “Ah, your children are 2 and 5? I bitterly regret missing those years ... you never get them back, you know. If I could do it all over again, I would not have worked full-time during those years, no matter what financial sacrifices I had to make.” This comment rattled me and made me reflect on my own work/life balance. I was working 4 days a week as a crisis counselor in a very busy university counseling service and starting a private practice on the other day of the week. It was hectic in our house, and any unplanned event was overwhelming: a sick child, a visit from the electrician, anything. At the end of that academic year, I made the decision to leave my crisis counseling position and focus on my private practice with a schedule that has allowed me to exercise daily, volunteer at the children’s school, make healthy meals for them, and simply have a chance to enjoy the short years of their childhood. I have never regretted this decision.

MAKING IT PERSONAL HOMEWORK

Go back through the chapter and make sure you have completed all the activities.

In *Transforming the Pain*, Saakvitne and Pearlman propose the following reflection on your support system:

At work: Do you have access to a supportive group of peers? How often you do meet? If you don’t currently have a peer support group, can you think of two people you could contact who would be willing to connect with you, whether in person or virtually, on a regular basis? What would you want to do with them: talk about work, go for a run, or share jokes?

At home: If you are in a relationship, consider having a conversation with your partner about the impact your work has on the way you behave at home. Let them know what you need when you are feeling depleted.

RECOMMENDED READING

Richardson, C. (1999). *Take time for your life*. New York: Broadway Books.

Posen, D. (2004). *The little book of stress relief*. Buffalo: Firefly Books.

For more books on self-care and simplifying, review the recommended readings in Appendix C.

Endnotes

1. Richardson, C. (1999). *Take time for your life*. New York: Broadway Books.
2. Thank you to Robin Cameron for this activity.