

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a form of emotional and physical exhaustion that can occur when dispatchers are repeatedly exposed to high-stress situations and the suffering of others. It is sometimes described as the "cost of caring" for people in distress.

Within the 911 World

- **Constant Exposure to Trauma:** Dispatchers often hear about or assist with traumatic incidents, such as accidents, violent crimes, and medical emergencies. While they are not physically present at these events, the vivid descriptions and emotions they experience over the phone can lead to secondary trauma.
- **Emotional Impact of Calls:** A dispatcher may feel deep empathy for callers in distress, especially in life-or-death situations. Repeated exposure to these emotional exchanges can lead to a sense of helplessness or frustration, particularly when the outcome is unfavorable or unknown.
- **High-Stress Environment:** The job requires quick decision-making, clear communication, and staying calm under pressure. Balancing these demands while empathizing with callers can drain emotional reserves over time.
- **Cumulative Effect:** Unlike many first responders who may have breaks between calls, dispatchers often handle back-to-back emergencies. This constant cycle leaves little time to process emotions, increasing the risk of compassion fatigue.

Signs of Compassion Fatigue in 911 Dispatchers:

- **Emotional Symptoms:** Feeling detached, irritable, or overwhelmed by work. No longer caring about those on the other side of the phone or radio
- **Physical Symptoms:** Fatigue, headaches, or difficulty sleeping.
- **Cognitive Symptoms:** Trouble concentrating or making decisions.
- **Behavioral Changes:** Withdrawal from colleagues, increased absenteeism, or loss of motivation.

Managing and Preventing Compassion Fatigue:

- **Self-Care:** Regular physical activity, proper sleep, and hobbies outside of work can help build resilience.
- **Training and Awareness:** Dispatchers and their supervisors should receive training to recognize the signs of compassion fatigue and strategies to mitigate it.
- **Spend plenty of quiet time alone.** Learning mindfulness meditation is an excellent way to ground yourself in the moment and keep your thoughts from pulling you in different directions. The ability to reconnect with a spiritual source will also help you achieve inner balance and can produce a turnaround, even when your world seems its blackest.
- **Hold one focused, connected and meaningful conversation each day.** This will jump start even the most depleted batteries. Time with family and close friends feeds the soul like nothing else
- **A healthy way to release your emotions so that you have room to continue to handle others.** Resetting and recharging is key.