

THE FACTS ON EDUCATION

How might compassion fatigue or burnout influence my workplace wellbeing, and what can individuals and leaders do to feel better?

The relational nature of teaching and the emotional labour of caring for children and youth present unique psychological hazards for educational workers. Compassion stress/compassion fatigue and burnout are occupational hazards that can interfere with an educator’s ability to maintain a safe, warm, and caring school culture for children and youth.

By knowing the risk factors and symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, investigating the wide range of individual, system, school, and professional interventions available to educators, and implementing these interventions after providing crisis and trauma work, educational workers, their employers, and their leaders can collectively develop occupational wellbeing.

Key terms related to education

Compassion Satisfaction	The pleasure or joy that is developed through connecting with kids, knowing one’s positive impact on society, and sharing one’s knowledge, skills, and competence with students.
Compassion Stress and Compassion Fatigue	Also called secondary traumatic stress, compassion stress/compassion fatigue are developed in response to helping others through, or to understand, a traumatic event. Symptoms include helplessness, changed worldview, and “putting self in a box.”
Crisis Work	Providing support and care for students during a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster or violent classroom incident.
Trauma Work	Providing support and care after students have experienced a traumatic event, such as physical abuse or death of a parent.
Burnout	The cumulative effect of heavy workloads, large classroom sizes, and reduced preparation time. Symptoms include physical and emotional exhaustion, brain fog, and lack of interest in teaching and learning.

Supporting educator wellness

Interventions are approaches to prevention and treatment that can alleviate the symptoms of compassion stress/fatigue and burnout. Self-directed interventions, such as eating well or getting exercise, are only one part of what’s needed to ensure occupational wellbeing.

Designed from the results of the Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Study (2022), HEARTcare is a framework that prompts educators to investigate and implement five interrelated interventions (school, system, individual, professional, educational worker) to prevent and treat compassion fatigue and burnout.

Interventions for wellbeing

Examples of School Interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spend five to ten minutes at each staff meeting exploring different benefits or other health and wellness programs available to employees. 2. Focus on creating a warm and caring school culture for children, youth, and the adults who care about them. 3. Defend key high-stress time periods, such as September and June, from extra work and new initiatives.
Examples of System Interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop wellbeing policies and frameworks that ensure staff workload is manageable, especially during known busy periods (e.g. report card or independent program plan writing times). 2. Provide opportunities throughout the school year for professional learning to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue. 3. Advocate for adequate resources and supports for children and youth who experience traumatic events
Examples of Professional Interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use supports provided by benefits plans. 2. Have a yearly physical with a family doctor. 3. Meet with a therapist before stress becomes distress.
Examples of Individual Interventions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schedule time for daily self-care during the workday. 2. Invest in activities that build one’s own physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, environmental, intellectual, and occupational wellbeing. 3. Monitor oneself for the symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue.

More information: The HEARTcare educators’ website (www.heartcareeducators.ca) is a free, evidence-based website that includes a downloadable workbook and professional learning template, peer-reviewed articles, blogs, and other resources. Coming soon: everything in French!

For online resources and references please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education

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