

**Compassion Fatigue in Students Completing Fieldwork: Reflective Essay**

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The completion of this project was difficult for me, but it was a necessary process for my own mental and emotional health. The resulting pamphlet is what I wish someone had told me before I entered fieldwork, and what I wish I had taken more seriously before I actually experienced burnout. My field placement in my final year of the Bachelor of Social Work program was at Safe Haven Ministries, an emergency shelter for survivors of domestic violence. The very nature of crisis work, I have learned, is chaotic, takes an emotional toll, and is difficult to process. Between day to day meetings with clients living in our shelter where I heard their stories firsthand and answering calls on Safe Haven's hotline, where trauma dumping is common and we can't always provide help in the way it is wanted, there is much opportunity for secondary traumatic stress to begin taking effect. My fieldwork experience, though ultimately rewarding, made this project somewhat of a mountain for me to climb. It simultaneously made this project more difficult, and spurred me on to its completion.

I spent much of the semester procrastinating on this project, and the reasons for this varied over time. At first, it was because I had my project scheduled out for the semester and there was some wiggle room to accommodate for adjusting to my new routine, my new work hours, and my new apartment. After the first month or so, it was because I felt I already had more than enough tasks between my other three classes and my internship, and more than enough stress as a result. And, after all, I still had time. As the semester entered its second half, the reason became that I was starting to recognize the signs of burnout in myself, and rereading my research in order to complete my annotated bibliography became almost painful. I reached a place in my internship where I had anxiety attacks while interacting with clients in an active crisis, and the attacks continued for some time after these interactions were over, as it was difficult for me to pull myself out of them. I was doing my best to be self-aware and to engage in

self-care, but I felt the need for so much self-care to balance the anxiety that I was often spending more time watching Netflix than I was working on any schoolwork, let alone this project. This is about the time I decided to go to the University Counseling Center and to finally address the issue head-on with my supervisor.

After a few sessions of therapy and more in depth sessions of supervision, I had stopped having anxiety attacks as frequently and could better cope with them when I did have them. I also reached the point where I could actually enjoy the work I was doing at my internship. I came to a place where I looked forward to seeing my clients all the time, and I have been able to build wonderful relationships with them. However, I still couldn't quite motivate myself to work on this. What finally motivated me to complete this project was that I stopped saying "I plan to finish on this date" or "I might get more of this done this week", and started saying "I will have this done and turned in on this date" and "I will complete these tasks today". Most of my remaining problems could be solved by changing my own self-talk, which is in itself a form of self-care. Changing my way of thinking and speaking about this project gave me a sense of relief, and I felt confident that I would be able to produce something all the more helpful to other students because of my struggles.

The self-care go-to list included in the pamphlet is made up of many of the things I like to do, particularly dance breaks, crafting, and getting ice cream. I've included positive self-talk and allowing yourself to just be on the list of self-care go-tos because of my sessions with my therapist. As I've discussed, changing the way I talked to myself and about myself and the project drastically changed my outlook on how my semester would end. However, talking with my therapist about the first break I had from everything academic or stressful in the semester made me realize how important it is to allow ourselves to just exist for a while. At the beginning

of April, I took a few days off from my internship to have my wisdom teeth removed. In the following days of the weekend, my friends that I live with and I had two of our other friends over to visit, and even though I was half asleep and in mild pain the entire time, it was the best I had felt all semester. We had no set plans. We just did whatever we felt like and had a really good time with it, and I wasn't worried about anything at all for those four days. Talking with my therapist about it later, I had the realization that it shouldn't take surgery for me to take a few days every now and again for myself. If I recognize that I have had enough and I need to decompress, then I should be unafraid to take the time to do so, and to let myself just be without worrying about anything else. I think this is the most important lesson I have learned while completing this project.

If there is anything that fellow and future students take away from my project, I want it to be this: What you are feeling is very real and valid, and there are steps that can be taken to address it. Be kind to yourself. Remember you are human. Allow yourself to just be.