

## **How to approach colleagues in the different phases of Compassion Fatigue**

### **Anxiety Phase**

In this phase most people will have a general feeling of unease, find it hard to relax and feel driven to be either constantly at work or on the go all the time. When they don't have things to worry about, they will worry about imagined events or ruminate over past issues.

One of the best approaches with this is to model the behaviour in yourself that you want to see in them. Get to work on time, go home on time, take your holidays and days off and emphasise how important it is to take care of yourself. Talk about how you feel sometimes and how the job can make you anxious, so they know they are not alone. Talk about mental health and compassion fatigue and how normal it is for the job to affect them emotionally and what causes the feelings. Confide in them that there are times when you feel wound up and give them some examples.

In this stage its important not to try and force them to see their behaviour as 'wrong' as they are already very stressed so starting conversations with, statements about how the job can make you feel is helpful. Encourage them to try something that will relax them, offer to go for a walk with them or find time for a quite chat over a drink. Then see if you can get them to talk to you about how this time helped as admitting that it does is a big step.

### **Irritability Phase**

In this phase it is vital that you see beyond the behaviour in the same way as you do with animals, the behaviour is the manifestation of the underlying cause so by focusing on the cause you can often work out what the problem is. Are they not sleeping, ill, in pain, being bullied etc.? Remember that in this phase they may be experiencing a loss of compassion so feel guilty.

One approach in this phase can be based on practical help to see if you can lessen their burden and encourage them to put boundaries in place and focus more time on themselves. They are feeling overwhelmed so giving them permission to acknowledge this is the first step. Start a conversation along the lines of I have noticed that you are.... (focus on feelings) don't try to fix it just listen and encourage them to find their own solutions then help them do this. In this phase people can lose perspective and try to do everything at the same time so encouraging them to slow down also helps.

Pick you time carefully as people in this phase can be quite up and down and may get irritated with you, don't take this personally its just part of how they are coping as they are trying to pretend that everything is ok and they can fix it themselves. They will appreciate the time you spend trying to help even if they don't acknowledge it at the time. However don't put up with any aggressive or unkind behaviour as this is not ok.

## **Withdrawal Phase**

In this phase the person is trying to protect themselves from the pain they are witnessing as they are feeling detached and a bit numb. They are aware of this but don't want to admit it to themselves or other people. Its quite a scary place to be if it has gone on for a while and this behaviour can become a habit.

When approaching them let them know you are concerned and if you ask them if they are ok always ask twice as you might get the real answer the second time. They may tell you that they just go home and shut out the world and don't want to talk about things. Encourage them to do the opposite, to try and connect with people away from work, go out and enjoy their hobbies so they are refilling their emotional energy as sitting watching TV and having a drink wont work in the long term. Tell them what you do to cope and encourage them to talk to you or someone at work about how they are feeling. Remind them that this is normal and how their body is protecting them from the trauma, and this is temporary.

You may need to be persistent in this phase as they will be reluctant to share with you how they are feeling. Many people feel that you won't understand so telling them that you feel the same sometimes will help them open up to you.

## **Robot Phase**

This is one of the hardest phases to help someone in and it may be that if you cannot get them to confide in you will need to talk to another colleague or your manager for advice. This detached feeling will make the person feel very lonely and guilty, but they will also be telling themselves that this is normal and how they have to be to cope with the work you do.

When trying to start a conversation about how they are feeling remember that they are a bit in denial so be aware of your body language and pick a time when you feel they can listen to you. Talk about how you feel first to connect with them and encourage them to talk about they are feeling. Suggesting that they write down how they are feeling can be helpful in this phase as it is emphasising that this is normal and with a bit of effort and support it can be reversed. Ask them to tell you why they initially wanted to do the job as this can help them re connect with positive feelings.

If you feel that your colleague is in a dark place, then its ok to ask their permission to speak to someone about getting them some extra help but if you are worried they might harm themselves then its ok to do this without their permission as you are acting in their best interests.

## **Further Help and Support**

Always be aware of your limitations and do not hesitate to signpost colleagues to the support available from the senior management team and the EAP. Its ok to suggest that they talk to their GP and it works well to suggest to them that they write down how they are feeling before the speak to someone.