



# Compassion Fatigue and Higher Education Faculty Mental Health: A Call to the Profession

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## INTRODUCTION

**Background:** Compassion fatigue (CF) describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others. Little is known about the prevalence and impact of CF (i.e., secondary traumatic stress & burnout), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and Major Depression Disorder (MDD) in Higher Education faculty.

**Purpose:** To examine key aspects of CF, secondary traumatic stress and burnout, and associations with psychosocial and occupational factors among faculty in higher education.

## METHODS

### Participants

Current higher education faculty members, recruited through multiple online academic groups in April 2022, completed an anonymous, online survey on occupational health. This study includes 315 participants, mean age 43.4 (*SD* = 8.7), 75.2% female, 87.3% White.

### Measures

**Demographics:** Age, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Education, Marital Status, Children

### Psychosocial Factors

- ProQOL – Compassion Fatigue (Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale, STSS; and Burnout scale)
- PHQ: Major Depression (MDD), Generalized Anxiety (GAD), and Somatization Disorders
- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
- UCLA Loneliness Scale

### Occupational Factors

- Years Experience (Academia and Current Position)
- Compassion Satisfaction
- Employee Engagement
- Perceived Organizational Support
- Work-Life Conflict
- Organizational Identification
- Workplace Bullying
- Burnout (Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Personal Accomplishment)
- Intent to Quit (Current Position and Academia)

### Statistical Analysis

Compassion fatigue was assessed using the ProQOL subscales (STS and Burnout Scales). Participants were classified with either Low or Elevated STS, and Low or Elevated Burnout, and were compared using Independent t-tests and chi-square tests of independence. Two binary logistic regression models were developed to assess key factors associated with STS and Burnout.

## RESULTS

**Table 1. Comparisons of Occupational Factors for Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) and Burnout**

	Low STS N = 138	Elevated STS N = 177	Significance Effect Size	Low Burnout N = 56	Elevated Burnout N = 247	Significance Effect Size
<b>Years of Experience</b>						
Total Academia	15.1 (9.8)	13.9 (8.2)	p = .243	13.6 (9.4)	14.5 (8.9)	p = .518
Total Current Position	10.5 (8.6)	8.4 (5.8)	p = .013; d = .30	9.1 (7.3)	9.5 (7.2)	p = .754
<b>Compassion Satisfaction</b>	34.9 (9.7)	33.4 (8.1)	p = .124	42.7 (5.1)	32.2 (8.3)	p < .001; d = 1.34
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>	35.8 (11.0)	27.5 (14.6)	p < .001; d = .63	41.6 (6.7)	28.6 (13.8)	p < .001; d = 1.02
<b>Employee Engagement</b>	45.8 (8.8)	42.2 (11.1)	p = .002; d = .35	51.0 (6.9)	42.1 (10.3)	p < .001; d = .91
<b>Perceived Organization Support</b>	22.1 (7.2)	19.0 (8.0)	p < .001; d = .41	25.4 (7.2)	19.1 (7.4)	p < .001; d = .86
<b>Work-Life</b>						
Work-Life Conflict	10.2 (3.8)	11.7 (3.3)	p < .001; d = .43	8.9 (3.3)	11.6 (3.5)	p < .001; d = .79
Life-Work Conflict	12.5 (5.6)	13.3 (4.9)	p = .190	12.4 (4.9)	13.0 (5.4)	p = .445
<b>Organizational Identification</b>	11.6 (3.9)	11.2 (4.0)	p = .332	12.3 (3.1)	11.1 (4.1)	p = .027; d = .28
<b>Workplace Bullying</b>	63.5 (23.3)	95.6 (37.8)	p < .001; d = 1.00	58.1 (20.3)	86.0 (37.1)	p < .001; d = .81
<b>Maslach Burnout Scale</b>						
Exhaustion	35.8 (14.7)	44.2 (14.2)	p < .001; d = .58	29.3 (9.9)	43.4 (14.9)	p < .001; d = 1.00
Depersonalization	12.2 (6.3)	16.8 (6.6)	p < .001; d = .71	9.4 (3.8)	15.9 (6.8)	p < .001; d = 1.02
Personal Accomplishment	32.4 (11.1)	30.1 (9.5)	p = .051	38.1 (8.9)	29.7 (10.0)	p < .001; d = .86
<b>Intent-to-Quit</b>						
Current Position this Year	2.2 (2.8)	3.8 (3.4)	p < .001; d = .52	2.0 (2.9)	3.4 (3.4)	p = .008; d = .43
Current Position in 5 Years	4.2 (3.4)	5.4 (3.4)	p = .003; d = .37	4.6 (3.4)	5.0 (3.5)	p = .496
Academia this Year	2.3 (3.1)	3.6 (3.3)	p = .003; d = .40	1.1 (2.0)	3.5 (3.4)	p < .001; d = .73
Academia in 5 Years	3.8 (3.5)	5.5 (3.4)	p < .001; d = .49	2.3 (2.5)	5.3 (3.6)	p < .001; d = .91

**Table 2. Comparisons of Psychosocial Factors**

	Low STS N = 138	Elevated STS N = 177	Significance Effect Size	Low Burnout N = 56	Elevated Burnout N = 247	Significance Effect Size
<b>Perceived Stress Scale</b>	18.5 (6.8)	22.3 (5.9)	p < .001; d = .60	14.5 (6.3)	21.8 (5.7)	p < .001; d = 1.27
<b>UCLA Loneliness Scale</b>	5.3 (2.0)	6.0 (1.8)	p = .002; d = .35	4.4 (1.5)	6.0 (1.9)	p < .001; d = .86
<b>Generalized Anxiety</b>						
Total Score	6.6 (4.0)	9.0 (3.6)	p < .001; d = .63	5.4 (3.4)	8.4 (3.8)	p < .001; d = .81
% Meeting Criteria for GAD	41.6% (57)	67.0% (118)	p < .001; OR = 2.9	25.5% (14)	62.6% (154)	p < .001; OR = 4.9
<b>Major Depressive</b>						
Total Score	6.9 (5.8)	12.0 (6.6)	p < .001; d = .80	4.2 (3.8)	10.8 (6.5)	p < .001; d = 1.09
% Meeting Criteria for MDD	32.4% (44)	61.6% (109)	p < .001; OR = 3.4	14.5% (8)	56.7% (140)	p < .001; OR = 7.7
<b>Somatization Score</b>	6.6 (4.4)	11.6 (5.7)	p < .001; d = .97	5.9 (3.9)	10.1 (5.8)	p < .001; d = .75

**Table 3. Stepwise Binary Logistic Regression – Factors Significantly Associated with Secondary Traumatic Stress**

	B	SE	Sig	OR	95% CI Upper	95% CI Lower
<b>Maslach Burnout Scale - Depersonalization</b>	.066	.032	.038	1.068	1.004	1.137
<b>Maslach Burnout Scale - Personal Accomplishment</b>	-.053	.018	.004	.949	.916	.983
<b>Intent-to-Quit - Current Position this Year</b>	.175	.062	.004	1.192	1.056	1.345
<b>UCLA Loneliness Scale</b>	-.194	.100	.052	.824	.678	1.002
<b>Somatization – Total Score</b>	.200	.042	<.001	1.221	1.125	1.325
<b>Constant</b>	-.206	.732				

Model = X<sup>2</sup>(5) = 74.500, p < .001; -2LL = 210.758; Nagelkerke R-Square = .401

## DISCUSSION

Today, faculty are supporting students with lived experiences of extreme loss, violent crime, natural disasters and other traumatic stressor events like the pandemic. Therefore, it's important to understand what compassion fatigue is and how faculty can safeguard against it.

### Occupational Factors

Faculty with Elevated STS had less years of experience in their current position, while faculty with Elevated Burnout had lower compassion satisfaction, and faculty with Elevated STS and Burnout had lower levels of job satisfaction, employer engagement, perceived organizational support, and higher work-life conflict and workplace bullying. CF is a key risk factor for quitting the profession, regardless of years of experience.

### Psychosocial Factors

Faculty with Elevated STS and Burnout had higher levels of exhaustion and depersonalization. Also, faculty with elevated CF had higher levels of perceived stress and loneliness. The proportion of faculty meeting GAD criteria was 67% in the Elevated STS group, 62.6% in the Elevated Burnout group. Faculty meeting MDD criteria was 61.6% in the Elevated STS group, and 56.7% in the Elevated Burnout group. These 2-week GAD and MDD prevalence rates are higher than what has been documented in the healthcare literature (Adibi et al., 2021; Olava et al., 2021).

**Table 4. Stepwise Binary Logistic Regression – Factors Significantly Associated with Burnout**

	B	SE	Sig	OR	95% CI Upper	95% CI Lower
<b>Education (ref: PhD)</b>	2.219	.831	.008	9.201	1.805	46.915
<b>Compassion Satisfaction</b>	-.257	.062	<.001	.774	.685	.874
<b>Work-Life Conflict</b>	.239	.101	.018	1.270	1.041	1.549
<b>Maslach Burnout Scale - Depersonalization</b>	.139	.067	.039	1.150	1.007	1.312
<b>Intent-to-Quit - Academia in 5 Years</b>	.206	.117	.077	1.229	.978	1.544
<b>Perceived Stress Scale</b>	.128	.061	.036	1.137	1.009	1.281
<b>Constant</b>	3.669	2.169				

Model = X<sup>2</sup>(6) = 99.581, p < .001; -2LL = 77.666; Nagelkerke R-Square = .665

## IMPLICATIONS

Prevention-intervention strategies can be used to buffer against CF by cultivating both a personal resilience practice, along with innovating institutional-level programming and resources for faculty focused on professional resilience and stress reduction.

This study provides a reference point from which future research endeavors, institutional initiatives, and shifts in organizational cultural norms acknowledging faculty mental health can begin.

Moreover, students will benefit when faculty feel well and are supported.