Empathy and Compassion Fatigue

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When you're talking to a friend about your hard day at work or talking about the fight you had with your partner... there can be nothing better than having that friend listen to you, understand you, and communicate back that understanding. What's happening here is empathy, and it's a powerful part of human connection. Empathy can help break down barriers, connect people across differences and can lead to better relationships, conversation, and wellness.

But when it comes to empathy, there can be a downfall worth thinking about. This downfall is compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue happens when we spend so much of our human energy trying to listen, understand and support others that we become exhausted ourselves. We can spend so much time thinking about other peoples' experiences, needs and well-being, that we can forget to think about our own. Someone experiencing compassion fatigue might doubt their own feelings or their own experiences, wants and needs. Or they may struggle to make decisions that suit them best.

To avoid compassion fatigue, we must be able to pay attention to someone else's experiences without losing sight of our own. We have to be able to recognize others' experiences and empathize with them, while still being able to see them as separate from our own.

Some strategies that can be used to help protect against compassion fatigue while engaging in empathy include:

- Set and keep healthy boundaries with others – tell a friend "Hey – it sounds like you're going through a lot, and I want to support you. I'm also feeling a little fatigued and need to protect myself right now. Can I work with you to get access to support that you need?"
- Identify sources of support for yourself and use them.
- Spend time doing what you need to recharge your own battery.
- Spend time journaling, meditating, or chatting with a friend about your own feelings and experiences so that you can stay in touch with them while being empathetic to others.