

An open letter to the loved ones of helping professionals...

Some of this is going to make sense to you. Some of it might not.

If you're reading this letter it is likely because you have a loved one who is a helping professional.

She may be a social worker, nurse, teacher, massage therapist, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, doctor, social service worker, probation officer, child protection worker, addiction counselor, psychologist, emergency response provider, veterinary doctor or one of the many other helping professions.

This means your loved one likely has a big heart and it's probably something you love about her.

But there are some things you need to know about how your loved one can be impacted by her work.

If your loved one works with people who are in pain, or who are suffering, then each day she does her best to help alleviate pain or suffering.

She entered her profession because something in her wanted to help people. Perhaps she had been helping people her whole life and it made sense to study/train as a helper.

Or perhaps she didn't know what she wanted to do, but she wanted to work with people. And once she experienced that good feeling of helping someone who was in pain, she was hooked.

Regardless of the reason she became a helper, she is one now.

Now here's something your partner likely didn't know when getting into her field.

Being a helping professional is a wonderful, rewarding career that can bless your heart. But it can also break your heart.

There will be days that your loved one hears stories from people who have, or are, experiencing so much pain and hurt that she will wonder how they are still alive. And I don't just mean physical pain, it's the emotional pain that can cut the deepest.

There will be days that your loved one hears the intimate details of immense grief, horrific trauma, or a lifetime of injustice.

There will be days that your loved one sees things that can never be unseen or will hear things that can never be unheard. And she will stand by that person in pain and do whatever she can to help them heal. Because your loved one has a big heart and truly wants to help.

And unfortunately, not everyone has the time, or skills, to process this exposure to pain during the day, so it can get stuffed down as she moves to the next client/patient and stuffed down again as she drives home and turns into family mode.

Now what does this look like once she gets home from work? What do you see when she walks through the door?

It varies for everyone, but you may see exhaustion, both physical and emotional.

You may see what appears to be "random overwhelm". This can mean

that in the middle of a normal, mundane tasks, your loved one may suddenly begin to cry.

You may see sadness, detachment, isolation or bad eating habits, zoning out in front of the TV or self-medicating with wine.

You may see irritability and begin to feel like you can't bring up anything important because you'll get snapped at.

All of these are symptoms of compassion fatigue and, if not resolved, can lead to burnout.

Now what can you to do support your loved one?

You can let her know what you've noticed about her behavior, that you care about her and want to help in whatever way she needs you. This does not mean it's okay for her to treat you poorly.

Most often your loved one doesn't want you to "fix" anything, she just needs to know you are there, you understand (as much as you can) and you support her.

If you're concerned that you are seeing these signs on a regular basis, it may be helpful for your loved one to get some professional support for compassion fatigue or burnout. It is not your job to be your loved one's therapist. That's what therapists are for:)

Like I said in the beginning, being a helping professional is a wonderful, rewarding job. There are many benefits from providing compassionate care each day and most helpers couldn't imagine doing any other job.

But on those day.... those days you see the sudden overwhelm or sadness, hug your loved one and ask her what she needs. Most often it's just the hug and offer.

Sending you good energy as you continue to love an amazing person,

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For more info on Compassion Fatigue and Burnout...

<http://www.charlenerichardsw.com/>