

Research Summary: Compassion Fatigue in Education: Understanding, Prevalence, and Strategies for Resilience

Educators operate in emotionally demanding environments, often exposed to student trauma and crises. While teaching is deeply meaningful, it carries significant emotional costs, including compassion fatigue (CF), burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (STS). At the same time, educators can experience compassion satisfaction (CS) - the positive fulfilment derived from helping students thrive. Understanding these interrelated constructs is essential for developing interventions that support educator wellbeing, retention, and professional resilience (Stamm, 2010; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2022; Silent Cost, 2025).

Key Concepts: Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction

- **Compassion Fatigue (CF):** Describes the emotional and physical costs of caring for others experiencing trauma or adversity. CF encompasses both burnout and STS (Stamm, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2017).
- **Burnout:** Results from chronic workplace stress, characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. Burnout arises primarily from systemic stressors such as workload and resource limitations, rather than trauma exposure (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; WHO, 2019).
- **Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS):** Emotional distress caused by indirect exposure to trauma, such as hearing about or witnessing students' suffering. STS can produce PTSD-like symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, avoidance, and emotional numbing (Figley, 1995; Bride, 2007; Ormiston et al., 2022). In education, repeated exposure to student trauma heightens STS risk.
- **Compassion Satisfaction (CS):** The positive reward and sense of purpose derived from making a meaningful difference in students' lives. CS buffers against burnout and STS, supporting resilience and professional fulfillment (Stamm, 2010; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2025).

Understanding the distinctions between burnout, STS, and CF, while recognising the protective role of CS, is critical for designing effective interventions.

Prevalence and risk in the Australian context

Australian research indicates that compassion fatigue and burnout are highly prevalent among educators. A national study reported that approximately 75% of teachers experience moderate to high secondary traumatic stress (STS), with 37% considering leaving the profession as a result (Silent Cost, 2025). Similarly, surveys of 1,612 teachers found that ~47% reported moderate burnout, ~30% high STS, and only ~27% experienced high compassion satisfaction (Oberg, MacMahon, & Carroll, 2025; Oberg et al., 2024). These findings highlight the significant emotional demands on educators and underscore the importance of targeted supports to maintain wellbeing and retention.

What can help: Practical applications for resilience

Evidence indicates that interventions are most effective when implemented at three levels: individual, relational, and organisational/ system.

Individual-Level strategies	
Mindfulness and self-compassion training for teachers	Mindfulness-based interventions reduce emotional reactivity to trauma exposure and daily stress, while enhancing awareness of meaningful moments (Carsley et al., 2019; Vo & Allen, 2023). Practices that promote self-kindness mitigate trauma-related distress and increase the positive impact felt from teaching (Sinclair et al., 2017).
Cognitive-behavioural skills (CBT)	Techniques like cognitive reframing, problem-solving, and relaxation skills reduce emotional exhaustion and intrusive trauma-related thoughts (Behi et al., 2023).
Gratitude/reflection journals	Reflecting on positive interactions with students fosters compassion satisfaction, reinforcing purpose and motivation (Silent Cost, 2025; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2022).
Boundaries & workload management	Setting limits around work hours and emotional investment reduces exhaustion and supports recovery (WHO, 2019).

Relational-Level strategies

Peer debriefing and reflective supervision	Structured peer discussions and supervision help process traumatic exposure, prevent emotional overload, and recognize positive impact (Ormiston et al., 2022; Silent Cost, 2025).
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Sharing strategies and celebrating successes increases collective efficacy, reduces isolation, and strengthens compassion satisfaction (Hattie, 2025).
Mentoring / buddy programs	Pairing early-career educators with experienced colleagues supports coping with stress, trauma exposure, and emotional labor (Silent Cost, 2025).

Organisational/ System-Level strategies

Trauma-informed school frameworks	Embedding trauma-informed policies helps staff recognize signs of STS, access supports, and maintain a safe working environment (NCTSN, 2017; Silent Cost, 2025).
Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training	Equips educators to respond to student trauma safely and boosts confidence in their impact, increasing compassion satisfaction (MHFA, 2025; Silent Cost, 2025).
Workload redesign and recognition of emotional labour	Adjusting duties, ensuring protected planning time, and acknowledging emotional labor reduces burnout and reinforces CS (Silent Cost, 2025; Oberg et al., 2025).
Monitoring wellbeing	Using validated tools (e.g., ProQOL-5) allows early identification of STS, burnout, or low CS and supports timely intervention (Stamm, 2010).

Key Principles

- **STS and burnout are distinct but interrelated:** STS arises from trauma exposure, burnout from chronic occupational stress; interventions must address both (Bride, 2007; Figley, 1995; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
- **Compassion satisfaction buffers stress:** Recognising the positive impact of one's work enhances resilience and reduces the likelihood of leaving the profession (Stamm, 2010; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2022; Silent Cost, 2025).
- **Multi-level strategies are most effective:** Individual skills, peer support, and systemic policies reinforce each other to reduce CF and strengthen CS.
- **Proactive monitoring and support:** Regular assessment of STS, burnout, and CS enables timely support before professional or personal consequences escalate.

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