

Film Review: *Portraits of Professional Caregivers*

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Abstract

The documentary film *Portraits of Professional Caregivers* is comprised of many meaningful narratives of child welfare workers, firefighters, law enforcement officers, social workers, psychologists, hospice staff, nurses, and doctors. Their stories reveal how helping professionals, while assisting clients or patients, may witness traumatic events, or be exposed to aversive details of a traumatic event, and as a result, they may be profoundly affected. Empathy is a characteristic that allows a caregiver to be attuned to their clients and their situations, and this compassion and understanding may increase a professional's risk of developing secondary traumatic stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue. In addition to the documentary's heartfelt narratives, new and inspiring ideas about self-care, coping, safety plans, and supportive organizational structures are outlined that are designed to promote and sustain the health and well-being of caregivers.

Keywords: Caregivers, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, self-care

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Portraits of Professional Caregivers is an extraordinary documentary that introduces the viewer to the antecedents to, and symptoms of, secondary traumatic stress [STS] that individuals in the helping professions may experience when they are exposed to traumatic events or details of these events. Vic Compher, director and co-producer of the film, is a licensed clinical social worker, a workshop trainer, a filmmaker, and author. He has 20 years of experience working in child protective services, and an additional ten years providing hospice care and clinical social work services to older adults. His experiences as a caregiver led him to develop workshops designed to increase professionals' self-awareness of the symptoms of secondary trauma and identify ways to provide peer and organizational support. By directing and producing the film, Vic Compher and co-producer Rodney Whittenberg have significantly increased the public's awareness of STS. All helping professionals should be encouraged to watch this documentary because of the substantial need for this population to have knowledge of the symptoms and prevalence of STS, and also because STS can limit a caregiver's ability to provide quality services (Bride, 2007; Dominguez-Gomez & Rutledge, 2009). Also, research suggests that STS is one of the reasons that human service workers leave the occupation (Bride, 2007).

The two-minute introduction of the documentary shares poignant photos of the events of 9/11, the Boston Marathon, and others. The moving scenes remind the viewer of these traumatic events and show helping professionals assisting those who were in need. The narrator then asks those watching to consider, "Who helps the helpers?" Research statistics containing significantly high rates of secondary trauma for specific professions follow, with emergency room nurses leading the group with an 85% prevalence rate of STS. Hospice nurses and child welfare workers follow with a 34% prevalence rate, and many other professions percentages are included as well.

The body of the film is largely comprised of the stories of professional caregivers. Social workers, child welfare workers, psychologists, hospice workers, family therapists, firefighters, and police commissioners, among others, share how they managed STS in their personal lives, and how it affected their continued service performance. Some of the professionals (social workers, therapists, psychologists, etc.) were trained to recognize symptoms of trauma and stressor-related disorders; they had years of experience, and yet they were still unprepared for their personal difficulties with STS, cumulative grief, or compassion fatigue. A comprehensive list of 20 symptoms of STS, and definitions of vicarious trauma,

compassion fatigue, and burnout were provided in the documentary. Symptoms that the professionals experienced and discussed were varied, and they included: insomnia, fatigue, anger, depression, increased heart rate, stomach pain, and anxiety.

In one segment, a hospice worker discussed the cumulative effects of grief. This led to an educational and interesting explanation of mirror neurons. According to the American Psychiatric Association [APA] (2005), mirror neurons are a brain cell that responds uniformly when a person completes an action, or when that person watches another individual perform the same action. This provides a neuroscientific explanation of how caregivers may have the capacity to feel and reflect others' emotions so accurately (APA, 2005). This supports the film's suggestion that helping professionals are among those who are most at-risk of vicarious trauma because they are expected to provide optimal quality services under stressful circumstances, and also because of their capacity to feel empathy for individuals who need their services.

Because of the heaviness of the documentary's content, it is a major strength that supportive organizational structures for staff are discussed, and further development of these methods within helping agencies are recommended. "Sanctuary" in the workplace is encouraged, and this concept is meant to represent an environment where staff can create and share their safety plans with supervisors or co-workers, and implement these plans when they are feeling stressed. A safety plan can be as simple as taking a brief break for reading, deep breathing, meditation, listening to music, getting a drink of water, or taking a walk. Additionally, healthy organizations may have the capability of counterbalancing the effects of STS by holding retreats and workshops that include time for staff to care for themselves and support their co-workers. Regular personal self-care, interests outside the job, and therapy are suggested for helping professionals. Staff are encouraged to ask themselves questions designed to increase their self-awareness about where they hold stress in their bodies, and what will help them increase their feelings of self-actualization and joy. Last, they discuss compassion satisfaction and inquire if caregivers feel honored to do their job, as this may be a protective factor against compassion fatigue. The film also brings attention to the benefits of noticing beauty in nature, feeling gratitude, and observing the positives in the environment around us.

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About the Author(s)

Jennifer Meehan is a Master of Social Work student attending Delaware State University, where she is employed as a graduate assistant. She has a Bachelor's of Science in Family and Community Services from the University of Delaware. Jennifer has over ten years of experience working with various populations in the mental health field. She is married with two children.