

Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Trauma

Presenting Challenge: A participating Primary Care Provider (PCP) sent a consultation request to WI CPCP, seeking guidance on addressing mental health difficulties in children. Feeling overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of cases, the PCP struggles to integrate assessment and treatment into their current schedule and workflow. The PCP is seeking advice on managing this situation.

Consultant's Response:

Facing a common challenge for PCPs today, where waitlists for mental health appointments grow while time allotted per patient decreases, let's tackle this issue in two parts. First, by sharing strategies reported by PCPs to handle overwhelming mental health needs. Second, by touching briefly on compassion fatigue resulting from secondary trauma and clinician burnout.

PCP Strategies:

Prioritize Urgencies:

- Address emergencies first, then focus on the most urgent problems within the available time and reschedule the patient to address the less pressing issues.
- For patients with continual emergencies, consider longer appointment slots or use rating scales for them to complete post-appointment. Sending along a stamped return envelope may increase the odds that the rating scale will be sent back.

Strategic Focus on Non-Emergent Cases:

- Select one child per clinic day to provide a thorough assessment to address their mental health needs. Thorough assessments may include completing rating scales, searching for mental health resources, providing psychoeducation, and consulting with [Wisconsin CPCP](#).
- For some kids/families with constant emergencies, leave time to address underlying issues that are likely 'driving' the emergencies. Options include filling out rating scales, searching for therapy resources, providing psychoeducation, and consulting with [Wisconsin CPCP](#).

Create an Ongoing List for Consultation:

- Maintain a list of kids with mental health needs and provide weekly consultations with WI CPCP.

Continuous Learning:

- Dedicate at least a half hour of your time monthly to learn more about mental health difficulties.

Utilize resources from [WI CPCP](#), [NIMH](#), [CDC](#), [AAP](#), and [AACAP](#).

Awareness of Crisis Services:

- Learn about local crisis services to enhance comfort and ensure a safety net for patients. Assistance is available with resource coordination with WI CPCP.

Teaching Points:

Considering the growing responsibility placed on primary care providers to address children's mental health challenges, it comes as no surprise that many feel ill-equipped to handle this burden for various reasons. The weight of these additional obligations often feels overwhelming, especially considering the lofty expectations imposed both externally by others and internally by their own standards. In the face of these high standards, even dedicated clinicians may be at risk of "caring too much," ironically leaving them with concerns that they are no longer able to "care enough." The intricate balance between meeting expectations and maintaining one's well-being becomes a delicate challenge for these healthcare professionals.

Compassion Fatigue: Defined as negative emotions resulting from helping others, particularly prevalent in medical professionals. Compassion fatigue is characterized by exhaustion, anger, negative coping behaviors, reduced empathy, and impaired decision-making. It can consist of burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Understand secondary traumatic stress through [references](#) and [articles](#).

- Burnout information and help can be found [here](#).
- Learn more about compassion fatigue [here](#).