

The Compassion Fatigue Check-In

A Reality Check for School-Based Helpers Who Are Running on Empty

"Because what you do still matters — and so do you."

Duke & Jen Marshall
Co-Founders | Academic Allies

Let's Be Honest About What You're Carrying

You hold space for everyone. Students in crisis. Parents at their breaking point. Colleagues who need to vent. And somehow, you're supposed to toggle between them all without missing a beat, losing compassion, or showing the cracks.

Your day isn't just busy — it's emotionally relentless. One moment you're de-escalating a student in crisis. The next, you're navigating an angry parent. Then a colleague stops by for a "quick question" that becomes an impromptu counseling session. Rinse and repeat.

Nobody tells you that the hardest part of being a helper isn't the workload — it's the constant emotional gear-shifting with no time to decompress between human beings who all need you to be fully present.

This tool isn't about being more productive. It's about helping you stay human.

We're Duke and Jen Marshall, co-founders of Academic Allies. Between us, we have 30+ years of living inside schools — as classroom teachers, district administrators, counselors, and consultants. We know what it means to care too much, give too often, and wonder if you're making any difference at all.

This resource was built from real conversations with real counselors, wellness coordinators, and student support staff who told us: "I'm exhausted, but I don't know how to stop." We designed it to help you recognize what's happening before you hit empty — and give you practical tools to course-correct without guilt.

With respect for the weight you carry,

Duke & Jen Marshall

How to Use This Resource

This isn't a checklist to complete and file away. It's a tool for noticing patterns, naming what's happening, and making intentional choices about what changes.

- Start here if you're:
- Feeling emotionally drained more days than not
- Avoiding certain people or situations because they feel overwhelming
- Questioning whether your work matters anymore
- Noticing you're more irritable, numb, or disconnected than usual

Quick-Start Path (15 Minutes):

1. Complete the Self-Check (5 minutes)
2. Review your Role-Specific Signals and circle the ones that hit hardest (3 minutes)
3. Choose ONE transition ritual or boundary script to try this week (2 minutes)
4. Schedule 15 minutes on your calendar to check back in (5 minutes)

You don't have to overhaul your life. You just need to start noticing — and give yourself permission to make one small shift at a time.

The Compassion Fatigue Self-Check

Rate each statement from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). Be honest — this is for you, not for evaluation.

EMOTIONAL INDICATORS

- ☐ I feel emotionally drained at the end of most days 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I find myself zoning out or emotionally disconnecting during conversations 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I have difficulty feeling empathy when I would normally respond with compassion 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I experience intrusive thoughts about students' or colleagues' problems outside work hours 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I notice increased irritability or impatience with my loved ones 1 2 3 4 5

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- ☐ I'm taking care of others more than I'm taking care of myself 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I find myself avoiding certain individuals because their needs feel overwhelming 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I catch myself checking the clock during support conversations 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I delay returning emails or calls because I don't have the emotional bandwidth 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I notice changes in my sleep patterns (difficulty falling asleep, waking with worry) 1 2 3 4 5

PROFESSIONAL IMPACT

- ☐ I feel less effective or more overwhelmed than usual 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I avoid emotional topics because I'm already maxed out 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I struggle to maintain boundaries between different roles (counselor, colleague, friend)
1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I find it hard to transition between supporting different populations (students, parents, staff) 1 2 3 4 5
- ☐ I question whether my work makes a difference anymore 1 2 3 4 5

YOUR SCORE:

15-25: Healthy functioning with normal stress response

26-45: Early compassion fatigue signals — implement preventative strategies now

46-60: Significant compassion fatigue present — immediate intervention recommended

61-75: Severe compassion fatigue or burnout — professional support strongly urged

Remember: This is a reflective tool, not a clinical diagnosis. Patterns matter more than your specific number.

Role-Specific Compassion Fatigue Signals

Not all compassion fatigue looks the same. The way it shows up depends on who you're supporting and what they need from you. Circle the statements that feel most true right now.

When Working with Students

- ☐ Feeling frustrated rather than curious about a student's repeated behaviors
- ☐ Dreading sessions with certain students
- ☐ Finding yourself becoming less creative in your problem-solving
- ☐ Noticing less patience for age-appropriate behaviors
- ☐ Limiting deeper conversations because you don't have the energy to address what might emerge

When Working with Parents/Families

- ☐ Rehearsing conversations with particularly demanding parents
- ☐ Feeling resentful when parents don't follow through on recommendations
- ☐ Avoiding certain families because their needs feel endless
- ☐ Finding yourself judging parenting choices rather than supporting growth
- ☐ Struggling to maintain professional boundaries (taking calls after hours, etc.)

When Supporting Colleagues

- ☐ Feeling burdened by others' sharing their work challenges
- ☐ Noticing yourself withdrawing from staff gatherings or collaborative opportunities
- ☐ Experiencing resentment when colleagues seem less affected by student needs

- Taking on tasks others should handle because it seems easier than training/supporting them
- Finding it difficult to transition from "colleague" to "counselor" mode when needed

Transition Rituals Between Roles

The emotional whiplash of moving from one person's crisis to another's everyday concern is exhausting. These quick resets help you shift gears without carrying residue from one interaction into the next.

QUICK PHYSICAL RESETS (30-60 seconds)

- Posture Change: Stand up, stretch your arms overhead, take three deep breaths
- Hand-Washing Mindfulness: Use 20-second handwashing time to mentally "wash away" the previous interaction
- Breath Square: Inhale 4 counts, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4
- Progressive Tension-Release: Tighten then release muscles from feet to head
- Environmental Reset: Straighten one small area while breathing deeply

MENTAL TRANSITIONS (60-90 seconds)

- Three Things: Name three things you did well in the previous interaction
- Boundary Visualization: Imagine placing the previous person's concerns in a safe container
- Present-Moment Grounding: Name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear
- Intention Setting: Set a specific intention for the upcoming interaction
- Compassion Bridge: Acknowledge the shift with a brief self-compassion statement

LANGUAGE FRAMES FOR TRANSITIONS

- "I want to give you my full attention. Let me take 30 seconds to wrap up my previous task."
- "I'm transitioning from a difficult conversation. I appreciate your patience as I reset."
- "Let's both take a deep breath before we begin, so we can be fully present."
- "I've been supporting someone in crisis. I may need an extra moment to shift gears."
- "Before we start, let me check in with myself so I can be most helpful to you."

Boundary Communication Scripts

Boundaries aren't about being cold — they're about being sustainable. Here's how to set them without guilt or apology.

WITH STUDENTS:

"I notice you're seeking support quite frequently. Let's create a plan for how you can practice some strategies between our meetings."

"That's a really important issue. I want to give it the attention it deserves, so let's schedule a specific time tomorrow rather than addressing it in passing."

WITH PARENTS:

"I'm available by email from 7:30-4:00 on school days. For urgent concerns outside those hours, here's our crisis protocol..."

"I appreciate you trusting me with this information. Some of what you're describing would be best addressed by [specific resource], which can provide more specialized support."

WITH COLLEAGUES:

"I value our collaboration, but I need to protect my lunch break for recharging. Can we find another time to connect?"

"I notice I've been taking on tasks outside my role. I need to refocus on my core responsibilities, which means I can't continue to [specific task]."

"When you stop by unscheduled for consultations, it's difficult for me to transition between responsibilities. Could we set up a regular check-in time instead?"

Personal Care Planning

Sustainable helping isn't about heroic effort — it's about consistent, unglamorous maintenance. Choose practices that fit your actual life, not the ideal version you wish you had.

DAILY MICRO-PRACTICES (2-5 minutes)

- Start the day with an intention rather than checking email
- Create a physical barrier between sessions (close door, walk a short distance)
- Use a visual reminder (small object, photo) of why your work matters
- Maintain a "wins" journal with at least one entry per day
- Practice the "sacred pause" between meetings—30 seconds of stillness
- Keep a self-compassion statement visible in your workspace
- End the day by naming three things that went well

WEEKLY MAINTENANCE (15-30 minutes)

- Conduct a personal supervision session (self-reflection on patterns, triggers)
- Engage in structured peer consultation
- Schedule non-negotiable physical movement
- Practice a hobby entirely unrelated to helping others
- Review boundaries and adjust as needed
- Deliberately step away from work conversations during one social gathering
- Plan the following week with buffer time between high-need interactions

MONTHLY SUSTAINABILITY (1-2 hours)

- Review your compassion fatigue self-check to identify patterns
- Engage in professional development that inspires rather than depletes
- Connect with mentors or experienced colleagues
- Evaluate your current caseload/responsibilities for necessary adjustments
- Practice saying "no" to one new request
- Schedule a full day where you are completely unavailable to others
- Create or revisit your values-based professional mission statement

Reflection Questions for Course-Correction

These aren't rhetorical questions. Answer them honestly — in writing if possible. Naming the problem is the first step toward solving it.

What boundaries can I (re)set to protect my emotional energy?

Consider:

- Email/communication hours
- Types of issues you will address directly vs. refer
- Physical space needs (closed door times, quiet lunch space)
- Transition time between meetings/sessions
- Clear role definitions with colleagues, students, parents

Reflection: Which boundary, if strengthened, would most support my wellbeing right now?

Who can I turn to for support when I'm running low?

Consider:

- Clinical supervisor or mentor
- Professional colleague outside your building
- Personal therapist or counselor
- Friend who understands without requiring fixes
- Professional association resources
- Employee assistance program

Reflection: What stops me from reaching out before I'm depleted? How can I lower that barrier?

What practices help me decompress or reset quickly?

Consider:

- Physical: Specific breathwork, progressive muscle relaxation, movement
- Mental: Guided visualization, gratitude practice, attention refocusing
- Environmental: Nature connection, listening to specific music, sensory grounding
- Social: Brief authentic check-ins, scheduled venting time, laughter

Reflection: Which practice can I realistically implement daily, even on the busiest days?

[illegible]

Real-World Application Examples

SCENARIO 1: The Continuous Crisis

Before: A counselor gives her personal cell number to families in crisis, receiving texts at all hours. She feels responsible for providing immediate support, leading to disrupted personal time and increasing resentment.

After: The counselor creates a clear communication protocol, providing families with the district crisis line and specific times when she's available. She creates templates for common responses, schedules specific check-in times with high-need families, and partners with community resources for after-hours support.

SCENARIO 2: The Role Blur

Before: A wellness coordinator finds colleagues stopping by throughout the day for "quick questions" that turn into impromptu counseling sessions. This fragments her day and leaves little time for scheduled responsibilities.

After: The coordinator creates a visible "availability schedule" outside her office, blocks specific "open door" hours for colleagues, and develops a brief form for non-urgent consultation requests. She practices kind but firm transition statements and refers colleagues to appropriate resources when their needs exceed informal support.

SCENARIO 3: The Empathy Overload

Before: A counselor notices increasing numbness after supporting students through multiple traumatic events. He finds himself avoiding certain students whose stories feel too overwhelming and skipping documentation because revisiting the content is too draining.

After: The counselor implements a structured peer consultation group, creates a brief grounding ritual between sessions, and schedules specific documentation time with self-care brackets before and after. He works with administration to balance his caseload with consideration for emotional intensity, not just number of students.

Building Community Care Systems

Individual self-care alone cannot sustain those in helping professions. We need structures that support collective wellbeing, not just personal resilience.

Peer Consultation Structure

- Form a small group (3-4 people) of colleagues in similar roles
- Meet bi-weekly for 30-45 minutes
- Use a structured format: case presentation, clarifying questions, suggestions, presenter reflection
- End with a brief personal check-in from each participant
- Maintain confidentiality while adhering to mandatory reporting requirements

Building Administrative Allies

- Schedule a brief meeting with administrators to share the unique challenges of your role
- Present specific examples of role-creep or boundary issues
- Propose clear solutions that benefit students while protecting staff wellbeing
- Connect your sustainability to student outcomes
- Request specific support (time, space, resources) rather than just understanding

Creating Cultural Change

- Model boundary-setting in visible, non-apologetic ways
- Normalize discussion of emotional impact in appropriate professional settings
- Acknowledge the reality of compassion fatigue without stigma
- Recognize and celebrate colleagues who demonstrate healthy professional boundaries
- Mentor newer staff in sustainable helping practices from the beginning

You're Still Human

You don't have to carry it all.

You don't have to solve it all.

You don't have to be perfect to be powerful.

Your value isn't measured by how many crises you manage or how many needs you meet. Your effectiveness isn't determined by your availability or how much you sacrifice.

You matter—outside your role, beyond your title, and apart from what you give to others.

Your wellbeing is not selfish—it's strategic.

The students, families, and colleagues you support need you at your best, not your emptiest. The school community doesn't need heroes who burn out; it needs sustainable human support systems who can remain present year after year.

Your longevity in this work may be your greatest contribution.

What Happens Next?

This resource is just one piece of a larger commitment we have to supporting the helpers who hold schools together. If this resonated with you, here's how we can continue the conversation:

Explore our full Caregiver Wellness Series — downloadable tools built for real school settings

Book a staff wellness PD session — customized support for your team

Download more free resources at www.WeAreAcademicAllies.com

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