ACADEMIC ALLIES

What It Costs to Care

A Compassion Fatigue Check-In for the people who hold our schools together

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

Duke & Jen Marshall
Co-Founders, We Are Academic Allies

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A note from us to you

Some days, the hardest part of working in a school isn't how much you do. It's how much of yourself each thing asks you to give.

You move from a student in crisis to an upset parent to a meeting where you're expected to be focused, patient, and ready with answers. You do all of it with a steady voice. Then you get in the car, and the people you love at home get whatever is left.

We know that day. Between us, we've spent decades in classrooms, campus and district leadership, and correctional education. We've watched some of the most dedicated educators we've ever worked with quietly run out of what they had to give — and we've seen how rarely anyone stopped to ask how they were really doing.

So this is us asking.

This isn't another assignment, and it isn't a test of how well you're coping. It's a chance to name what your work has been costing you — and then decide, practically, what you need in return. Some of that will be in your hands. Some of it won't be, and we'll help you tell the difference.

You deserve care whether you're having a strong week or a hard one. Your worth was never measured by how much you can absorb.

With appreciation,
Duke & Jen Marshall

START HERE

How to use this guide

Who it's for

Teachers, counselors, nurses, paraprofessionals, administrators, front-office teams, interventionists, bus drivers, cafeteria staff — anyone whose school day involves carrying other people's needs. Every role carries different pressures. Take what fits and skip what doesn't.

What we mean by "compassion fatigue"

Compassion fatigue is the emotional and physical toll of being repeatedly exposed to other people's suffering, distress, or trauma — and absorbing some of it yourself. In plain terms, it's what happens when you keep walking alongside people through hard things faster than you can recover from them.

Burnout is related but different. It grows out of ongoing workplace strain — heavy workload, relentless pace, too little support or control — whether or not trauma is involved. In schools, the two often show up together, and both can be made worse by a hard season outside of work. That's why this guide addresses all of it. You don't need to know which one you're feeling to use it. You just need to be honest about what's happening.

Choose your path

10 minutes today	Take the check-in (**page 4**), see where to start (**page 5**), and pick one reset (**page 7**).
Over one week	Add one boundary sentence (**page 8**) and jot a line a day in the weekly log (**page 14**).
Over two weeks	Build your plan (**page 13**), raise any bigger issues with leadership (**page 10**), then come back and check what changed (**page 15**).

> **Keep it yours.** This is a private reflection. Keep it somewhere safe, and don't write names or identifying details about students, families, or colleagues. If you lead a team and want to share this guide, start with **page 11**.

STEP ONE

Your check-in: notice, don't judge

Think about the **last two weeks**. Check one box for each statement. There's no score and no cutoff. Most people's answers point to more than one source, and that's expected — the tags show you *where to start*, not what's wrong with you.

Statement	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Not sure
YOU I reach the end of the day emotionally spent.	☐	☐	☐	☐
YOU I carry school home — replaying conversations or staying on alert after the day is over.	☐	☐	☐	☐
YOU I feel less connected to the purpose that brought me into this work.	☐	☐	☐	☐
YOU My sleep, concentration, or relationships at home have taken a hit.	☐	☐	☐	☐
PEOPLE I'm less patient or present with others than I used to be.	☐	☐	☐	☐
PEOPLE I avoid conversations because I can't take on one more need.	☐	☐	☐	☐
PEOPLE I feel numb toward situations that once would have moved me.	☐	☐	☐	☐
CONDITIONS I don't have enough time, backup, or resources to do this work well.	☐	☐	☐	☐
CONDITIONS I'm expected to be available more than is reasonable.	☐	☐	☐	☐
CONDITIONS I'm the one everyone turns to — and I don't have anyone to turn to.	☐	☐	☐	☐

The two statements that deserve my attention:

What has been hardest lately:

What has helped — even a little:

STEP TWO

Reading your check-in

Look at where your **"Often"** marks landed. That pattern matters more than any number.

Keep in mind that your marks can reflect several overlapping things at once — compassion fatigue, burnout, a demanding stretch at work, or something heavy at home. The pattern is a starting point for reflection, not a conclusion about you.

YOU

Your recovery is running behind.

You're giving more than you're getting back. Start with the resets and the end-of-day close-out on **page 7**.

PEOPLE

Your capacity for connection is stretched.

You still care; you're just running low. Start with the boundary sentences on **page 8**.

CONDITIONS

This isn't a personal-habit problem.

Self-care won't fix a staffing gap. Start with **page 10** — this is information your leaders need.

Spread across all three? That's common. Pick one small reset this week so you have a little more in the tank, then build your plan on **page 13**.

Lots of "Not sure"? That's common too, especially when you've been running on autopilot. The weekly log on **page 14** will help you see your days more clearly.

> **One honest question.** Is what I'm feeling mainly something *I* can change, something *my team* can change, or something *leadership* has to address? The answer is often "more than one" — and that's exactly why no single strategy is enough.

Where most of my "Often" marks landed, and what that tells me:

UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERN

What the signals may be telling you

Compassion fatigue rarely announces itself. It shows up sideways — in small changes you may have stopped noticing.

WITH STUDENTS

Impatience with repeated needs. Dread before a difficult conversation. Less room for curiosity or humor. That doesn't mean you've stopped caring. It usually means you need recovery time, someone to consult with, or more support.

WITH FAMILIES

Rehearsing conversations after hours. Feeling you must answer every message immediately. Struggling to separate what's urgent from what can wait until tomorrow.

WITH COLLEAGUES

Becoming the person everyone turns to while your own work piles up. A steady stream of "quick questions" can quietly consume an entire day.

WITH YOURSELF

Letting go of the things that used to refill you — the walk, the phone call with a friend, the hobby, the quiet morning — because they've started to feel like one more thing to do.

WITH THE SYSTEM

High caseloads, thin coverage, unclear crisis procedures, constant interruptions, and responsibilities without matching resources. These are **working conditions, not personal failures.**

> None of these signals mean you've stopped caring. Most of the time they mean you've been caring for a long time without enough coming back.

IN THE MOMENT

Resets you can actually use

You rarely get fifteen minutes between conversations. Sometimes you get thirty seconds. Use what fits.

30 SEC

Put both feet on the floor. Drop your shoulders. Look around and name one thing you can see. Then tell yourself: "*That conversation mattered. I can start the next one without carrying every part of it.*"

60 SEC

Drink some water, stand and stretch, or walk to the doorway and back. A physical transition helps your body register that one interaction has ended.

2 MIN

Write one line about what needs follow-up (no identifying details). Then name the next step, the right person, and when. Once it's written down, your mind can stop holding it.

ANY TIME

When you need a moment before responding: "*I want to give this the attention it deserves. Give me a moment to finish what I'm doing.*"

END OF DAY

The close-out. Before you leave, take three minutes: write tomorrow's first task, list anything unresolved with its next step and owner, and say to yourself, "*Today is finished. What isn't done has a plan.*" Then choose a physical marker — turning off the lights, the click of your seatbelt — as the line where the workday ends.

My most realistic reset:

When I'll use it:

My end-of-day marker:

IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Boundaries that still sound like you

A good boundary isn't a wall. It protects the relationship *and* your ability to keep showing up for it.

> **A boundary never replaces** a required safety response, mandated reporting, or your school's crisis protocol. If someone's safety is at risk, follow your procedures immediately.

TO A STUDENT

"I'm really glad you told me. I want to make sure you get the right support, so let's figure out the next step together."

TO A FAMILY

"I can hear how important this is. I respond to messages between [hours]. For an urgent safety concern, please [approved school or emergency procedure]."

TO A COLLEAGUE

"I want to help, and I'm in the middle of something I need to finish. Can we find ten minutes this afternoon?"

TO A SUPERVISOR

"I'm concerned the current volume of urgent requests is slowing our response time. Could we look at priorities, coverage, and what might be reassigned?"

TO YOURSELF

"I can care deeply about this and still not be the only one responsible for it."

One sentence I'll use this week, in my own words:

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Three situations you may recognize

These are composite examples drawn from common school experiences — not case studies of real people. See if any of them sound familiar.

THE NONSTOP CRISIS

A school counselor keeps getting contacted after hours about situations that need a team response. Instead of remaining the only point of contact, she works with leadership to clarify crisis procedures, backup coverage, and how families are told to reach help. **The goal is reliable care — not one person available every minute.**

THE OPEN-DOOR OVERLOAD

An interventionist is interrupted all day long. He sets a predictable consultation window for non-urgent questions and makes sure everyone still knows how to reach him immediately for urgent student concerns. **Predictable access protects both the students and the helper.**

THE PERSON WHO ALWAYS SAYS YES

A paraprofessional is repeatedly asked to cover extra duties. She tracks the pattern for two weeks, checks her role expectations, and asks her supervisor to clarify priorities and coverage. **She doesn't have to prove her dedication by absorbing an unlimited workload.**

> Notice what each person did: they didn't just try harder or rest more. They **named a pattern and changed a condition.** That's the move the next page will help you make.

Which situation looks most like my work?

What would need to change in my setting?

BEYOND SELF-CARE

When the problem is bigger than a habit

Not everything can be fixed by taking a walk or protecting your lunch. When the expectations themselves are unrealistic, it's reasonable — and professional — to ask for a change in conditions, not just a better coping strategy.

Bring the pattern, not just the pain. Before you talk with leadership, get clear on three things:

1. The pattern

What keeps happening, how often, and since when?

2. The impact

How it affects service to students, safety, time, or staff.

3. One request

Coverage, protected time, clear referral criteria, a staffing review, or a defined response protocol.

Ask for one thing, not everything. One clear, workable request is far easier for a leader to say yes to.

> *"I care about doing this well. Here's what I'm seeing again and again, here's how it's affecting the work, and here's one change I think would help. Could we look at it together?"*

The pattern I've noticed:

The impact on the work:

The one specific support I'll request:

If nothing moves after the first conversation, that isn't the end. Follow up in writing, agree on a date to revisit, and consider raising it together with colleagues who share the concern.

FOR PRINCIPALS, DIRECTORS & TEAM LEADS

If you lead others

Your staff will learn more from how you use this guide than from the guide itself. Handled well, it builds trust. Handled carelessly, it becomes one more thing being done *to* them.

- **Make it an invitation, never an assignment.** Don't collect, review, or ask about anyone's responses. Ever.
- **Give the time; don't add the task.** Offer fifteen minutes of an existing meeting instead of sending it home as homework.
- **Model accountability, not disclosure.** You don't need to share your own check-in results, and staff should never feel they must share theirs. Instead, go first by naming one workplace condition you intend to improve — and how staff will help shape the solution.
- **Ask about conditions, not coping.** "*What's one thing about how we operate that makes this work harder than it needs to be?*"
- **Act on something — visibly.** Choose one condition you can change in the next 30 days, change it, and tell your team what you did.
- **Don't answer a staffing problem with a wellness email.** A self-care tip is not a response to a coverage gap.

> And remember: leaders carry this too. Take the check-in yourself, privately — for you, not just for your team.

One condition on my campus or team I can change in the next 30 days — and how staff will be involved:

Which roles on my team are carrying more than their share?

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

What this can look like in practice

An illustrative example — not a real person — showing how one reflection can become one action and one follow-up. Yours will look different, and it should.

1 The check-in

A middle school teacher marks YOU "I carry school home" and CONDITIONS "I'm expected to be available more than is reasonable" as *Often*.

Hardest lately: family messages arriving at 9 p.m. and feeling like I have to answer them right away.

2 The plan

KEEP IT	*My Saturday morning walk with my sister.*
CHANGE IT	*Turn off school email notifications on my phone after 6 p.m.*
ASK FOR IT	*Ask my principal whether our campus has a family-communication response window I can point parents to.*
LET IT GO	*The belief that a fast reply is how I prove I care.*

First step: add my response hours to my email signature — by Monday. Support: my grade-level partner.

3 The week of noticing

Drained: Tuesday and Thursday evenings, after late messages. Helped: doing the close-out before leaving campus.

4 Two weeks later

Evenings feel calmer most nights. Still hard: one family continues to message late. My principal agreed to send a campus-wide reminder about response times. Next step: involve our counselor in that family's concerns so I'm not the only point of contact.

> Notice what *didn't* happen: the problem wasn't solved overnight, and the teacher didn't try to fix everything. One honest pattern led to one small change, one clear request, and one next step. That's the whole method.

STEP THREE

Your small, workable plan

Fill in only what fits your circumstances right now. **Doing less is allowed.** Need a model? See the completed example on **page 12**.

KEEP IT
A practice or relationship that already helps

CHANGE IT
One small adjustment within my control

ASK FOR IT
A resource, decision, or support I need from someone else

LET IT GO
An expectation that was never mine to carry alone

My first step:

By when:

Who can support me:

When self-care isn't enough. If your stress is persistent, getting worse, or affecting your ability to function at work or at home, reach out to a qualified health or mental-health professional, your Employee Assistance Program (your HR office can tell you if you have one — these services are often free and confidential), or someone you trust.

If you're in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text **988** (U.S. Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). For immediate danger, call **911**.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK

A week of noticing

No names, no stories, no judgment — just broad patterns. One line a day is plenty. Words work as well as numbers.

Day	What drained me?	What helped?	Energy
MON			Low · OK · Good
TUE			Low · OK · Good
WED			Low · OK · Good
THU			Low · OK · Good
FRI			Low · OK · Good

At the end of the week

What was predictable?

What was outside my control?

Where did support make a difference?

One pattern I want to change or bring up with someone:

TWO WEEKS FROM NOW

Come back and check in again

A useful check-in shows you what's changing, not just what hurts. Return to **page 4** and mark it again in a different color. Then look at what moved — without grading yourself.

What feels different from two weeks ago?

What stayed difficult?

Did my first step help? How do I know?

What support is still missing?

My next reasonable step:

> **If nothing improved, that's information — not a verdict on your effort.** It may be time for a different kind of support, a firmer conversation about working conditions, or both.

BEFORE YOU CLOSE THIS GUIDE

You are a person before you are a position.

The care you give students, families, and colleagues matters. So does the care you receive.

We hope these pages gave you words for something you've been carrying, one practical next step, and permission to ask for the support your work deserves.

You don't have to solve everything today.

And you don't have to do it alone.

With respect and appreciation,
Duke & Jen Marshall
Co-Founders, We Are Academic Allies

> **More free resources for educators and leaders:** www.WeAreAcademicAllies.com

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This is an educational reflection resource. It is not a validated screening measure, diagnosis, treatment plan, or emergency service. Follow applicable school policy, professional standards, confidentiality rules, and reporting obligations.