

Student Self-Disclosure and Faculty Compassion in Online Classrooms

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Abstract

Compassion fatigue is well documented among professionals working in social service fields such as healthcare, emergency response, social work, and education. In higher education, there is a growing demand for faculty led student mental health support and life coaching services to support student retention and success. Students in online settings tend to disclose personally traumatic experiences and circumstances more openly in communications with faculty to seek support and extensions. In this study, we surveyed faculty to explore the relationship between student self-disclosure and faculty compassion fatigue in online classrooms. We hypothesized that student self-disclosure of personal challenges is common and may be related to faculty compassion fatigue and burnout. Results supported the hypothesis that student self-disclosure of personal challenges and trauma was common, experienced by 96% of surveyed faculty. Most faculty had low to average compassion fatigue scores; however, demographic and professional factors were associated with faculty compassion fatigue and burnout. Younger faculty, less experienced faculty, and female faculty had higher levels of compassion fatigue and burnout than older faculty, more experienced faculty, and male faculty. This study provides insight into the personal challenges and trauma students self-disclose to faculty, faculty variables that are associated with disclosure, and the impact student disclosure may have on faculty.

Keywords: Online teaching, compassion fatigue, student support, self-disclosure, faculty training

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Self-disclosure is the act of sharing personal information about oneself with others, often with the goal of increasing connection, attraction, or empathy in interpersonal communication (Ryan, Kramer, & Cohn, 2016). Compassion fatigue is a psychological phenomenon defined as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization (Figley, 1995) that results from the emotional strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. It can occur in isolation following a single traumatic event or through cumulative trauma exposure (American Institute of Stress, 2017). Compassion fatigue has been extensively studied among medical professionals (see reviews in Sinclair et al., 2017; Smart et al., 2014; Sorenson et al., 2016). Physicians, nurses, psychotherapists, and emergency workers who help traumatized patients may develop their own PTSD symptoms as an indirect response to their patients' suffering (Babbel, 2012). However, other social service professionals such as police officers, social workers, and therapists can also experience compassion fatigue as a result of providing care and service to people suffering from significant emotional and physical distress (Caringi et al., 2015; Miller et al. 2018). In these social service professions, clients often self-disclose distress to their support team, leading to compassion fatigue for the social service provider (Teater & Ludgate, 2014).

Among educators, there is also evidence of compassion fatigue (Robinson, 2018). In higher education, anecdotal evidence from faculty meetings, training events, classroom observations, and conference workshops suggests students are increasingly disclosing personal information to faculty in open classroom discussions and one-on-one messages, often as rationale for absences, to request extensions, or to explain poor quality work. The increasing pressure to provide mental health support and emotional labor to students is having an impact on faculty (Gould, 2018; Ernst, 2019; Heemstra, 2019). As the culture of higher education moves towards the theoretical framework of humanizing education, faculty members are increasingly called upon to fill the role of confidant, counselor, and cheerleader. Many institutions and pedagogical experts are encouraging instructors to seek disclosure from students in order to support students (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2019). Faculty members, the majority of whom have no formal training in therapy, counseling, or psychology, and often have minimal knowledge of relevant university and community resources to appropriately counsel students who disclose significant personal struggles or issues, are taxed with knowing how to best respond to student disclosures. This can be especially challenging for adjunct, part-time, contracted faculty at online universities who typically lack the institutional knowledge and resources that other faculty (hybrid/in-person, tenured/full-time) have. If faculty members are unprepared to support student mental health needs, not only could compassion fatigue impact faculty mental health, but it may in turn, impact student success and persistence. In this paper, we present results from an online faculty survey examining compassion fatigue among online faculty members, identifying the prevalence of online faculty compassion fatigue, the prevalence of student self-disclosure, and demographic factors that might play a role in online faculty compassion fatigue.

Literature Review

The expectation for faculty members to invest emotional labor in their teaching is well documented (see reviews in Bellas, 1999; Lawless, 2018; Meier, 2005; Moore et al., 2010; Tunguz, 2016). As technology-mediated communication has increased in recent years due to social media, online/distance education, and widespread global internet access, so has researchers' understanding of the impact of technology on our tendency to self-disclose. Although findings in this area are mixed, some research (Joinson, 2001; Krasnova et al., 2010)

suggests that people tend to self-disclose more to others in an online or technology-mediated setting. Exclusively online education programs, due to their more flexible, often asynchronous nature and largely open enrollment admission requirements, tend to be tailored to students with more challenges that have an impact on their education (i.e., non-traditional/working adults, diverse student populations, low-income students, students who are less academically prepared, first-generation college attendees, single parents). The combination of students more likely to be experiencing trauma or personal distress and the technology-mediated online educational setting may result in increased student disclosure of highly personal traumatic or challenging situations and consequently, in compassion fatigue among online faculty members.

Students increasingly present college staff and faculty members with experiences of homelessness, hunger, violence, and mental health needs (Romo, 2018; Tarkan, 2018). In a survey of college counseling center directors, 95% reported that the number of students with significant psychological problems is growing on their campuses (APA, 2013). Colleges and universities, both face-to-face and online, are struggling to meet the mental and emotional health needs of students (Lederman, 2019; Thielking, 2017; Wolverson, 2019). For online faculty members specifically, online institutions may not have the same opportunity to observe in-person warning signs and may not have the same referral staff available to help students with these types of personal challenges (Barr, 2014). Given that those in medical or social services positions who are specifically trained to support trauma victims struggle with compassion fatigue, the increasing tendency to rely on untrained faculty as counselors and life coaches in online settings has the potential to result in compassion fatigue among faculty. Additionally, women faculty members are perceived as more approachable and empathetic (Bachen, 1999; Feldman, 1993). Studies have found they have higher emotional labor expectations compared to male faculty members (El-Alayli et al., 2018; Lawless, 2018, Tunguz, 2014), which suggests that sex differences are an important variable in the study of self-disclosure and compassion fatigue among faculty.

Better understanding of how student self-disclosures are perceived and handled by faculty members provides an opportunity to inform institution-level student support practices, faculty support practices, and faculty training initiatives. In this study, we sought to understand whether student self-disclosure of personal challenges and trauma is associated with faculty compassion fatigue.

Research Questions

Our study examined four research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of student self-disclosure to faculty members?
2. What is the prevalence of compassion fatigue (CF) and compassion satisfaction (CS) among faculty members?
3. What demographic factors are associated with CF and CS among faculty members?
4. Do students self-disclose equally to both male and female faculty members?

Based on the literature, we made two predictions. First, we predicted that high levels of student self-disclosure would be related to faculty CF. Second, we predicted that female faculty members may be more often subjected to self-disclosure due to perceptions that women are more approachable and empathetic.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were recruited through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. Invitations to participate in the study were sent via email to the authors' professional networks. Participants were directly recruited through email or social media, or were indirectly recruited through snowball sampling, receiving the survey link from other colleagues. The invitation included an informed consent statement and a link to eligibility criteria that instructors completed via self-report. Those who met the eligibility criteria and consented to participate then clicked a link to complete the online survey instrument. This study was approved by the American Public University System Institutional Review Board and follows the ethical treatment of human subjects outlined by the American Psychological Association.

The survey was available to participants between May and August 2018. A total of 238 faculty members with online teaching experience participated in the study. All participants self-reported that they met the eligibility criteria and had the option of opting out of the survey on the welcome page. Eligibility criteria required participants to hold an advanced degree in any discipline, to hold a current online position at an institution of higher learning or have held a faculty position in the past and be at least 18 years of age. Participants were asked to respond to the questions in the context of their online teaching experience(s). Therefore, in this study, participants are referred to as “online faculty.”

Instrument

The survey instrument used in this study included three categories: Demographics (6 questions), Faculty Experience (3 questions), and the Professional Quality of Life Scale version 5 (ProQOL 5). The first two categories collected information about respondents' experience with online teaching and personal priorities and responsibilities, including both open- and close-ended questions.

In use since 1995, the PROQOL 5 is a widely used scale to measure the quality of life one experiences in their work in a helping career (health care, social service, education, etc.). The ProQOL measures two aspects of how one's work impacts quality of life: Compassion satisfaction (CS) and compassion fatigue (CF) (The Center for Victims of Torture, 2019). The ProQOL5 includes 30 statements related to CS and CF. Participants rate their experience with each statement as never, rarely, sometimes, often, or very often. The ProQOL is the most widely used scale to measure compassion fatigue (Circenis et al., 2013; Stamm, 2010). In its various revisions it has been used extensively in studying compassion fatigue among caregiving professionals such as nurses and health care workers (Heritage, Rees, & Hegney, 2018), substance abuse counselors (Perkins and Sprang, 2013), and governmental emergency response workers (Dang et al. 2015). Although the construct validity of the ProQOL scale has not been widely studied in the literature, the ProQOL instrument has been found to have reliability estimates for the subscales of “.87 for the compassion satisfaction scale, .72 for the burnout scale, and .80 for the compassion fatigue/secondary trauma scale” (Dang et al. Zhou, 2015, p.440).

CS refers to respondents' positive feelings about their ability to help through their work. CF refers to respondents' negative feelings about their ability to help through their work. On the ProQOL, CF is broken down into two categories: Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress. Burnout is a negative effect of caring, referring to the exhaustion, frustration, depression, and difficulty doing work effectively that workers in helper roles can feel. Secondary Traumatic

Stress is a negative effect of secondary exposure to trauma or traumatized people, linked with sleep difficulties or intrusive images. Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress are scored as separate variables in the survey and can be quantified and studied independent of one another. For this study, we examined only the Burnout component of CF, taking into consideration that Secondary Traumatic Stress typically is found in emergency workers and therapists who become vicariously traumatized through secondary exposure to extreme trauma and stress through others. For clarity, we refer to the Burnout scores as Compassion Fatigue-Burnout (CFB) to ensure the term Burnout alone would not be confused with general Burnout, unrelated to compassion fatigue.

Analysis

Using SPSSv25, we used Pearson’s r correlation, t test, ANOVA, and stepwise multiple regression to examine the relationships between faculty demographics and experience data and the levels of CFB and CS they reported.

Results

Demographics

A total of 238 online faculty members completed the survey. Most identified as white non-Hispanic (83%) females (67%). Participants ranged in age (2% were 30 or under, 24% were 31-40, 41% were 41-55, and 33% were 55+). Most participants were partnered or married (75%). Fewer than half the participants shared the number of children they have (*n*=122) with only 17% of these participants being parents.

Participants had advanced degrees; most held doctoral degrees (60%). Most faculty members had 10+ years of teaching experience overall, either online or face-to-face (75%), and the majority had 5 or more years of online teaching experience (77%). Reported academic specialties (*n*=234) were varied to include liberal arts/humanities (43%), social sciences (36%), business securities/IT (5%), health (2%), math/science (6%), and other disciplines (8%).

Research Question 1: Prevalence of Student Self-Disclosure

Most faculty members reported that they experience student disclosure of personal information in class (*n*=161, 96%). Online instructors shared specific examples of personal experiences and challenges that students shared with them. These ranged from everyday challenges like family, financial, and employment issues to urgent and dangerous situations related to suicide, abuse, and addiction. Incredibly, survey responses included seven mentions of student experience with suicidal ideation, or suicide risk and attempts. Overall, student disclosures and faculty responses fell into three primary categories: emotional support, resource referral, and short-term class-based assistance as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure Category	Example Faculty Response
Emotional support	“Sympathy. I may attempt to steer them back to the task at hand.”
	“My responses are empathetic and affirming. I offer advice when possible and needed.”
	“I am always sympathetic and tell the student to take care of their family and themselves first...school is second.”

Resource referral

“Thank them for sharing if the sharing is related to course material and does not involve a sensitive topic such as sexual assault. In some circumstances, it may lead to an email to discuss counseling services at the school or just a suggestion to keep the conversation.”

“If they self-disclose something that requires assistance. I send them a private email telling them who or which office to contact. I also usually give that person/office a heads up which I also alert students too.”

“I listen, I let them vent, and then I advise they contact a doctor, counselor, spiritual leader, the police, whomever is the appropriate path for them.”

“If I have concerns about students' current condition, I make appropriate referrals.”

Short term, class-based assistance

“I try to be sympathetic, and typically offer students relief on course deadlines.”

“I honestly let them know I will work with them. I offer them time to the best of my ability to complete assignments. I offer two chances for each assignment grade wise. I sympathize and empathize with students when they come to me with concerns.”

“I try to reassure them and make allowances accordingly.”

Research Question 2: Prevalence of Compassion Satisfaction (CS) and Compassion Fatigue-Burnout (B)

We examined whether CS and CFB are prevalent among online faculty. The mean CS score was 40.3 with a range of 17-50 ($n=171$, $SD=6.7$). The mean CFB score for online faculty was 22.1 with a range of 10-39 ($n=165$, $SD=6.3$). According to Stamm's (2010) assessment of these scores, most online faculty members had an average to high level of CS ($n=171$, 99%) and all had low to average levels of CFB ($n=165$, 100%).

Research Question 3a: Demographic and Professional Factors Associated with Compassion Fatigue-Burnout (CFB)

Older faculty members had significantly lower CFB scores than younger faculty ($F=7.65$; $p<.001$). Professional background factors like graduate degree ($F=1.88$, $p=.17$) and discipline of expertise ($F=.78$, $p=.56$) were not related to CFB. Other personal factors such as marital/partner status, number of children, and race/ethnicity were not related to CFB scores.

Total number of years teaching overall were unrelated to CFB scores ($F=.59$, $p=.55$). Comparatively, more years teaching online specifically tended to have lower CFB scores ($F=1.81$, $p=.14$) although this trend was not statistically significant.

Most faculty members reported that students self-disclose personal challenges with them during class. We examined whether this was related to faculty burnout scores. Faculty CFB scores were higher among faculty members who reported that students disclose personal information compared with faculty members who reported that students do not disclose any personal information or disclose personal information only as it relates to course topics; however, this trend was not statistically significant ($F=.93$, $p=.39$).

Research Question 3b: Demographic and Professional Factors Associated with Compassion Fatigue (CS)

Older faculty members reported significantly higher CS ($F=20.54, p<.0001$). Professional factors such as type of graduate degree and discipline of expertise were not related to CS. Personal factors such as marital/partner status and race were not related to CS. Interestingly, number of children was significantly related to higher CS scores ($F=3.02, p<.01$) and was unrelated to CFB scores ($F=1.53, p=.17$).

Faculty members with more years of teaching experience had significantly higher CS scores ($F=4.59, p=.01$). Number of years teaching online had an even more significant relationship with CS scores ($F=5.85, p=.001$). Length of overall teaching experience was unrelated to CFB scores ($F=.59, p=.55$). Length of online teaching was also unrelated to CFB scores ($F=1.81, p=.14$).

Research Question 4: Sex Differences in Compassion Satisfaction (CS) and Compassion Fatigue-Burnout (CFB)

We examined the relationship between sex, compassion satisfaction, and burnout among online faculty members and found a significant relationship between sex and CFB score. Females had higher CFB scores than males ($F=3.34, p=.03$). All faculty members ranged within the low to average CFB range identified by Stamm (2010), but females reported higher burnout scores than males, suggesting sex differences in burnout rates in online teaching. We found no significant sex difference for CS ($F=.57, p=.56$).

Factors Predicting Compassion Fatigue-Burnout (CFB)

We used a stepwise multiple regression to examine which demographic and employment experiences predicted CFB among online faculty (see Hunsaker et al., 2015). Based on demographic and employment experience characteristics identified as significant in our analyses, or as potentially significant from the literature, we entered six variables into a stepwise regression model. These variables were: sex, age group, discipline of expertise, number of years teaching, number of years teaching online, and student self-disclosure experience. As shown in Table 2, age group ($\beta=-.30, p<.001$) and sex ($\beta=-.23, p<.001$) significantly predicted CFB levels. Older faculty and male faculty had lower CFB scores than younger and female faculty. Sex was the most significant predictor of CFB (adjusted $R^2=.12, F=22.88, p<.001$).

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regression for Predicting CFB among Online Faculty

Variable	Adjusted R^2	R^2 change	F	Standardized coefficient β	t
Age group	.12	.12	22.88	-.30	-4.08
Sex	.16	.05	16.84	-.22	-3.09

Note. $n=159$.

Discussion

Almost all participants reported that students disclose personal issues and challenges to them. Mental health challenges are increasing among students and many higher education institutions encourage close relationship building between students and faculty to improve student connection and belonging (see Pacansky-Brock et al., 2019; Gould, 2018; Ernst, 2019; Heemstra, 2019). Most online faculty members had an average to high level of CS, and all had low to average levels of CFB. In other words, although the prevalence of student disclosure of personal challenges and trauma was high, it did not seem to impact faculty members' level of CFB.

Using a stepwise regression model, the two biggest predictors of CFB were age and sex. Younger and female faculty members had higher CFB scores. Studies have shown that emotional labor is disproportionately expected from women and untenured faculty (El-Alayli et al., 2018; Lawless, 2018; Tunguz, 2014). Women faculty are viewed as more approachable, empathetic, and nurturing (Bachen, 1999; Feldman, 1993). These faculty may feel more pressure to engage in a counselor-like role, taking more personal responsibility with “making it right” for the student in order to support their success and progression. For untenured and women faculty this approach may help them secure future teaching opportunities (Kadowaki & Subramaniam, 2014). The disproportionate impact of emotional labor on women has been identified in other social service and helping professions as well. For example, in a study of healthcare providers, females experienced significantly higher levels of CF (Sprang et al., 2007). Our finding that female faculty members experience higher CFB scores fits with the larger body of work examining gender disparities in emotional labor among women faculty members and is worthy of additional study.

In recent years, higher education has moved from an exclusive focus on academic training for well-prepared students to a more comprehensive view of education to include remediation, life support, mentoring, and coaching more diverse, challenged learners. Our results examined predictive factors of CFB such as sex, experience, and age that may be mitigated through more or better intervention, training, and support for faculty members who fall into those categories. One potential solution could be to try and lower rates of student self-disclosure, particularly when it is directed toward younger, female faculty who are most at risk for CFB. Given that higher education is moving toward a holistic, humanized model for students in meeting their educational goals and holistically supporting their well-being, this solution is not viable. It is unlikely that student self-disclosure of emergency and trauma will decrease. However, being aware of this trend in self-disclosure, the student needs that prompt it, and the impact of student disclosure on instructors, provides institutions with an opportunity to better meet the diverse needs of students. One viable solution is to have more delineated roles between faculty as experts who teach and assess students in academic discipline content and support staff with expertise in mental health and social work who work with students on their holistic well-being. Future studies should further explore these strategies to determine what targeted supports and trainings would be beneficial for faculty and identify what larger support systems are needed outside the classroom to support student success, retention, and degree completion.

As we consider the somewhat surprising findings that, despite individual differences based on sex, age, and experience levels, faculty members did not express high levels of CFB, future studies could investigate the potential role of vicarious resilience (Hernández et al., 2010) in mitigating possible CFB among online faculty. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread disruption it has caused, particularly in education due to an immediate transition from face-to-face classrooms to online learning for most K-12 and traditional universities, has been extremely challenging. Many traditional instructors were neither prepared nor trained in online education or in working with students through trauma and life disruption, making understanding the relationship between self-disclosure, personal trauma, compassion fatigue, and online learning even more relevant. New research is already highlighting the significant negative impact emergency distance learning as a result of the pandemic is having on student and teacher mental health and inequity in education (Bozkurt et al., 2020). A future area of study could be to examine the prevalence of student self-disclosure in online classrooms compared with face-to-face classrooms, given this unprecedented shift to distance learning because of the pandemic. Of

additional interest to more completely understand the phenomenon of compassion fatigue in online educational settings would be to further explore the role that variables such as socioeconomic status (of faculty and students) and cultural competencies (of faculty and students) play in both student self-disclosure and faculty compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction. Once the phenomenon of compassion fatigue in online educational settings is more fully understood, training faculty in trauma-informed teaching practices (see Anderson et al., 2015; Crosby et al., 2018) may have an impact on burnout and compassion fatigue among faculty.

With better understanding of the personal challenges and trauma that students disclose to faculty members, university leaders can consider how to more effectively support students who experience trauma or personal struggles. University leadership can identify ways to provide support and training to faculty members to be better prepared to help students in need. By more effectively supporting faculty in their efforts to support students, we can more effectually ensure that students persist and succeed in their academic programs.

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