

An Exploration into Compassion Fatigue and Burnout experienced by Radiation Therapists working clinically

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What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue is the result of intense use of empathy and emotionally acute contact with patients and their families. (1)

Compassion fatigue causes decreased productivity, increases sick days and influences a higher staffing turnover.

It was first identified in a comprehensive study of nurses who work in Emergency Departments, who consistently demonstrated high levels of empathetic care for individuals. (3) It found that compassion fatigue resulted in a significant compromise in the nurse's wellbeing and their efficiency when working. The opposite of this can be highlighted as compassion satisfaction, (1)

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a prolonged response as a result of chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors in the workplace.

It is defined by three dimensions, being exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency.

Work demands can be classed as quantitative (workload, high pace workplace) and qualitative (emotional demands of patients and families, physical demands and mental demands). (1)

The result of burnout in a clinical setting is reduced empathy and negative behaviour towards coworkers. (1)

How do Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Relate to each other?

Compassion fatigue is linked to burnout. It is a related concept that results in the development of frustration, a loss of control and empathy.

There is a blurring between compassion fatigue and burnout, as they lend into each other. (1)

Recovering from compassion fatigue can take minutes to hours, whereas burnout requires more active care and time out for an individual to recover. Recognising indicators earlier can prevent graver outcomes.

03. Key Elements that lead to Compassion Fatigue

Radiotherapy as a profession can be challenging but highly rewarding. With the increasing demands being placed on Radiotherapists working clinically, what are the main causes of compassion fatigue?

- Cancer Burden - The physical, emotional, financial and social impacts of the disease and its treatment
- Patient Characteristics - A patient's physical and emotional suffering, the progression of their illness, reception of difficult news and witnessing the impact of cancer on patients' families.
- Frequent Deaths - This can have a significant psychological and emotional effect on Radiotherapists, increasing burnout and compassion fatigue but also vicarious trauma (exposure to traumatic experiences of others through work or relationships).
- High Workload - Radiation Therapists are facing a higher workload due to increasing cancer rates and an aging population
- Staff Shortages - Post COVID, Radiotherapists experienced a high turnover of staff and have been unable to regain trained staff members in the profession. This is placing higher stress levels on staff who have remained. (4)

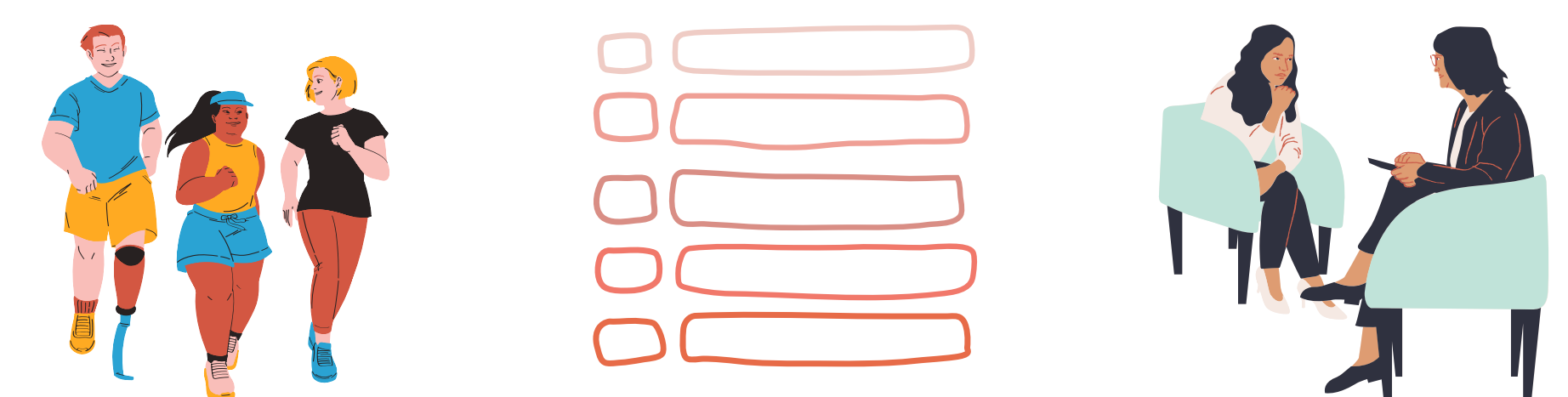
What are the effects of these stressors on Radiation Therapists?

- Anger
- Intolerance
- Irritability
- Scepticism
- Resentfulness
- Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms

These negative emotions when working clinically as a Radiation Therapist allow for mistakes to be made and for patients' needs to be overlooked when they are on treatment. (4)

WE NEED TO BE PROACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE

Proactive support focuses on building resilience and implementing preventative strategies, rather than solely reacting to burnout symptoms. This includes fostering self-awareness, establishing healthy boundaries, prioritizing self-care and promoting a supportive work environment. (3)



What can we do to reduce Compassion Fatigue?

Well Checks

Well checks would mean the adoption of a process used by NSW Health paramedics, which is a regular check in with staff. It is provided by their Staff Psychology service, to support their mental health and wellbeing. (2)

When relating it to a Radiotherapy setting, it is a short period of time where small groups are able to honestly ask individuals they work with about their emotions and if they are struggling at all.

It needs to have its own time carved out during the day to ensure staff are not skipping it and if any answers are alarming, staff are able to escalate on the behalf of their coworker when necessary. (2)

Reducing the stigma of seeking support

Reducing stigma surrounding mental health support is crucial for encouraging people to seek help when needed. This can be achieved through:

- Education - Continually promoting benefits of reaching out in workplaces and how compassion fatigue and burnout can be identified
- Open conversations - e.g. Well Checks
- Challenging stereotypes - Deconstructing outdated ideals of what struggles with mental health look like and how they may present in contemporary settings e.g. correcting language and promote equality
- Promoting accessible and affordable support weekly/fortnightly/monthly, in person or online.
- Promoting understanding and acceptance of mental health conditions - Utilising events like R U OK Day, creating a norm that promotes openness

(1) & (3)

Inserting pockets of Fun!

Though it seems odd to promote this in a place of work, inserting 5-minute breaks that promote movement, and laughter drastically reduces sick days taken due to exhaustion, improves cognitive function of staff members and prevents occupational stress and burnout syndrome.

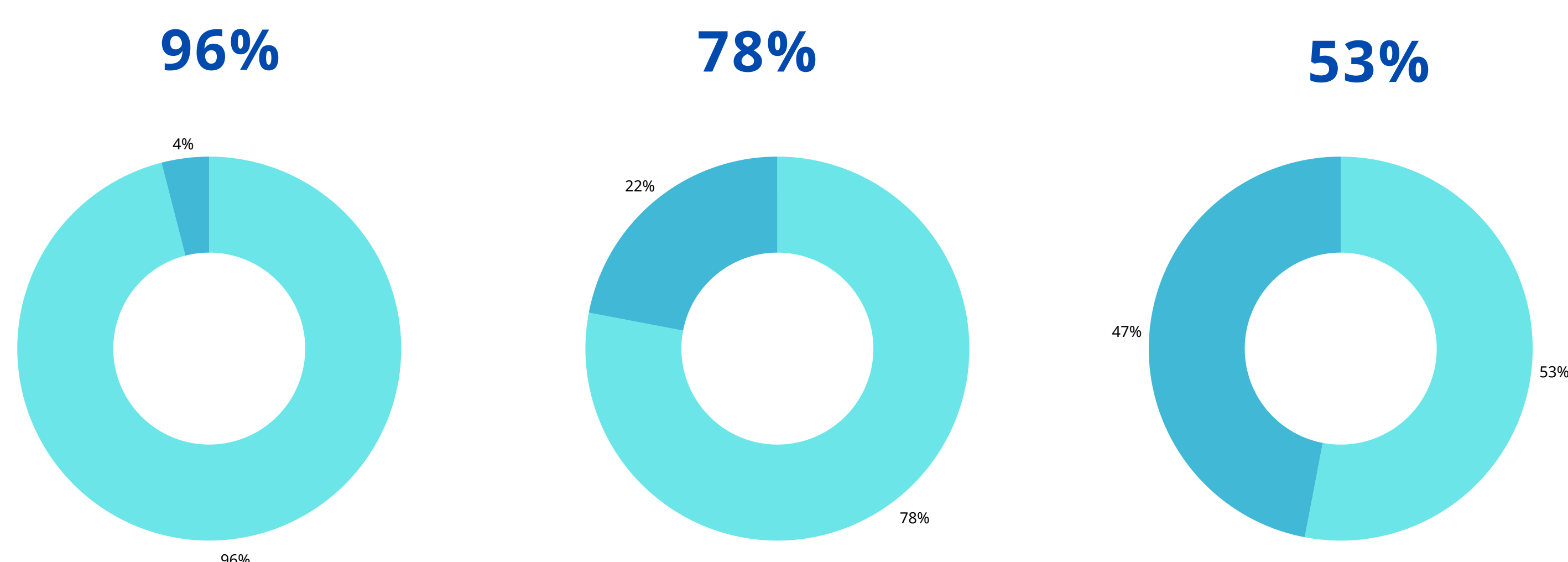
Some examples include quick workout sessions involving push ups, sit ups and star jumps, Zumba with music playing or a stretching routine in an open space.

Statistics in Australia

Indicators of an individual experiencing burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of personal accomplishment.

The majority of Radiation Therapists surveyed stated they had experienced an increase in all signs of burnout, mainly when in the treatment role.

These indicators are a large reason for why Radiation Therapists are rapidly leaving the profession and those who remain are having to take more leave to recover. (3)



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Artwork by Lisa Kelly of Gumbaynggir Country

