

Compassion Fatigue

Mark Topazian, MD

GMHC 2026

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . ."
- 2 Corinthians 1:3

- What is compassion?
- Is compassion optional?
- Am I suffering from compassion fatigue?
- Preventing and recovering from compassion fatigue

Compassion

splagchnizomai: To be moved
in one's bowels

Compassion

splagchnizomai: to be moved
in one's bowels

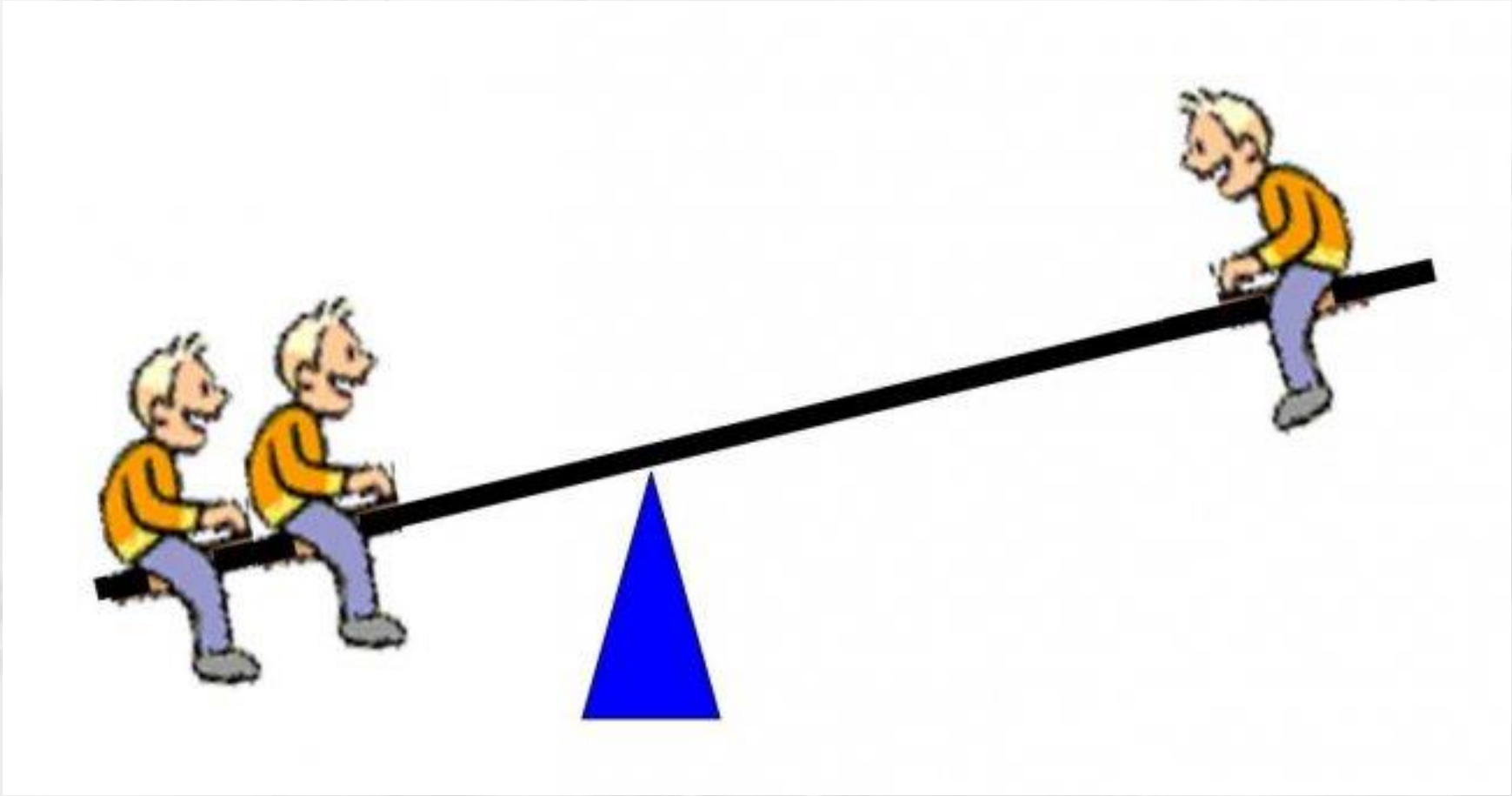
compatti: to bear with

Compassion

splagchnizomai: to be moved
in one's bowels

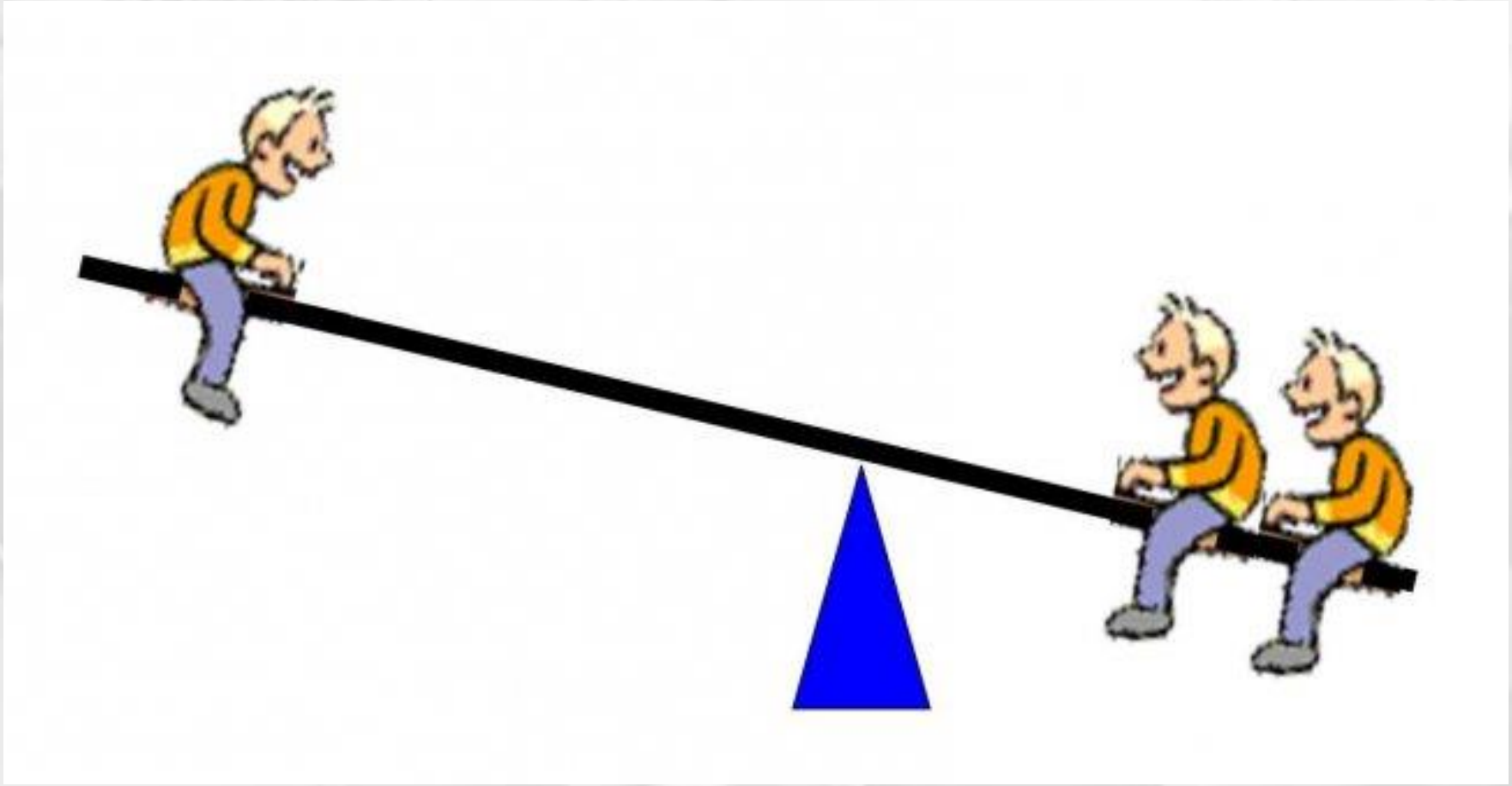
compatti: to bear with

A caring concern for others
that motivates you to help



Satisfaction

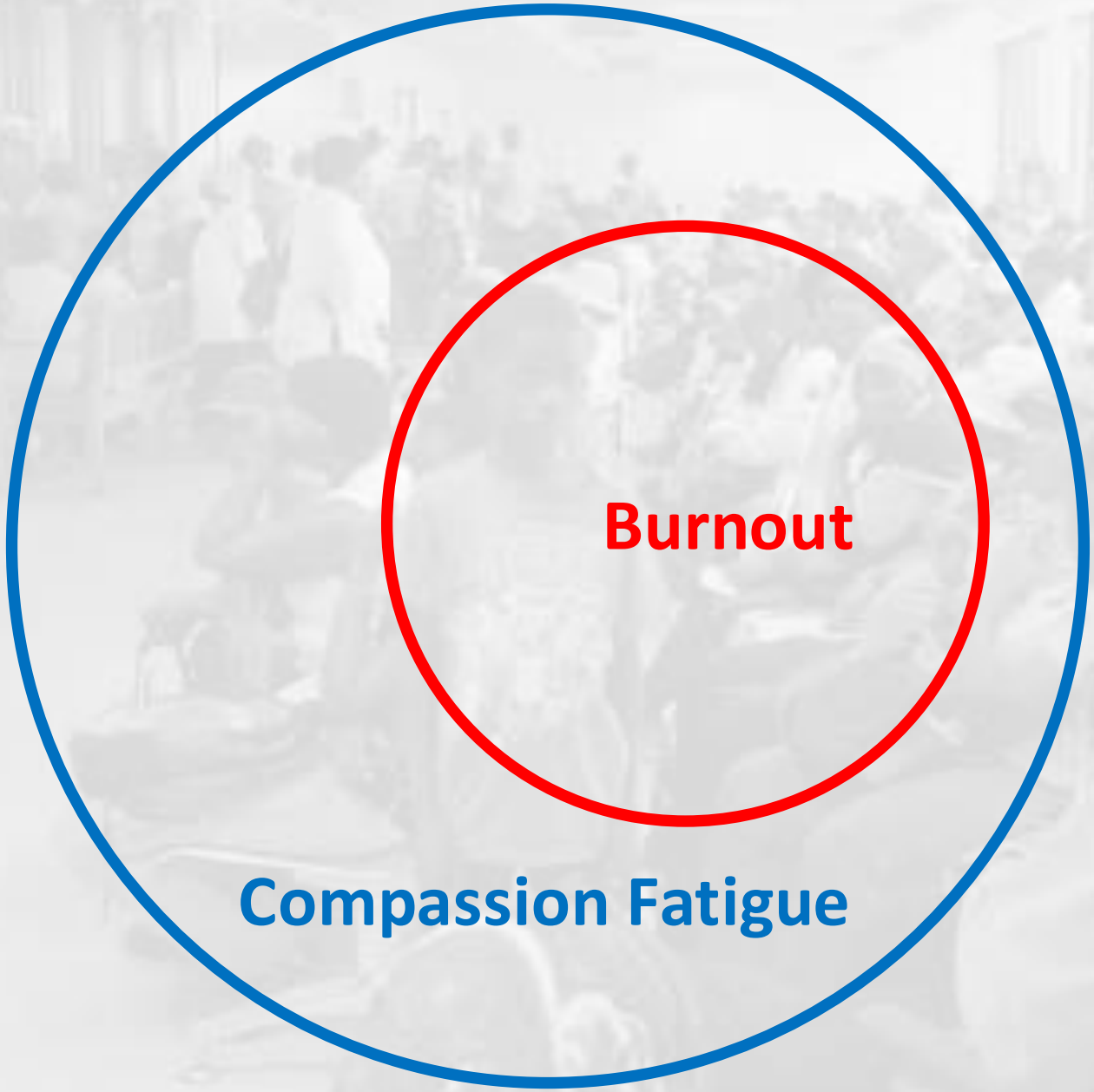
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Fatigue

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Ichigo,
“Life,”
2026

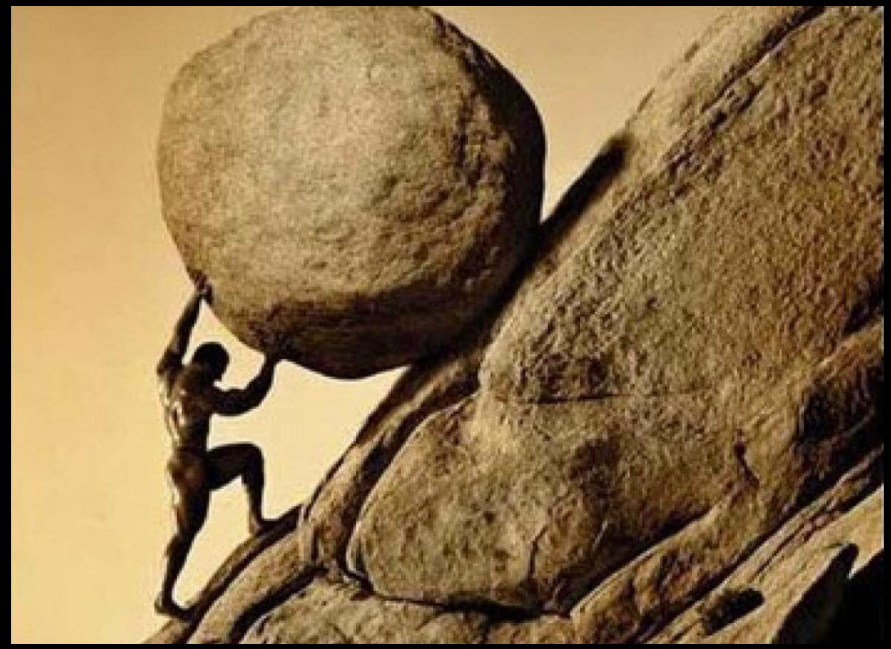

Burnout
Compassion Fatigue

Burnout  **Compassion Fatigue**


0.9% NaCl
500 mL
PROPOFOL
O2
SUCTION
MODE: AC/VC
VT 560 mL
RR 16
PEEP 8 cmH2O
FiO2 40%
HR 82 bpm
BP 118/74 mmHg
SpO2 97%
RR 16
36.7°C
Dr. L. Chen



https://www.craiyon.com/en/image/57Sui8ezRCa3ynelDcACsQ



https://www.davelabowitz.com/blog/sisyphus-and-leadership/

Predictors of compassion fatigue

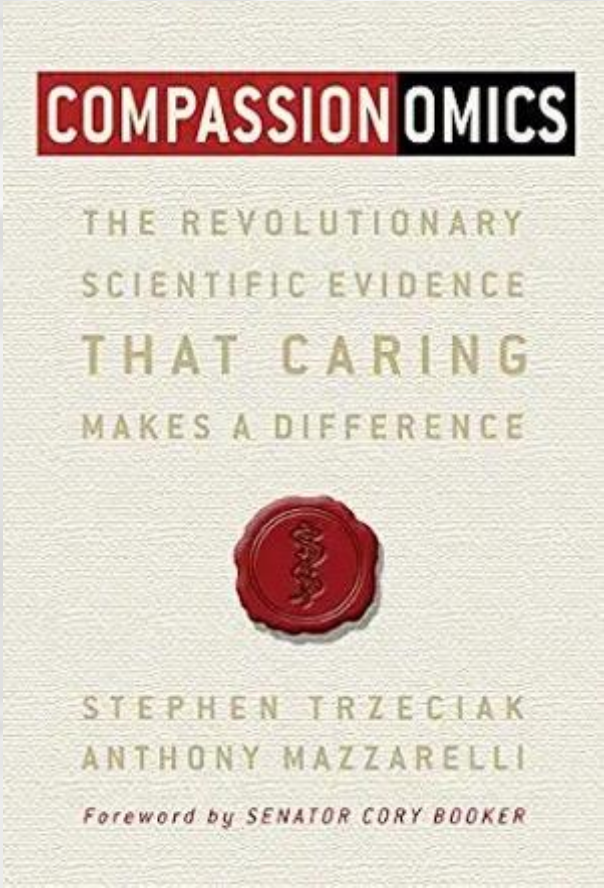
- Long working hours
- Heavy workloads
- Lack of managerial/institutional support
- Burden of exposure to suffering
- Burden of moral injury



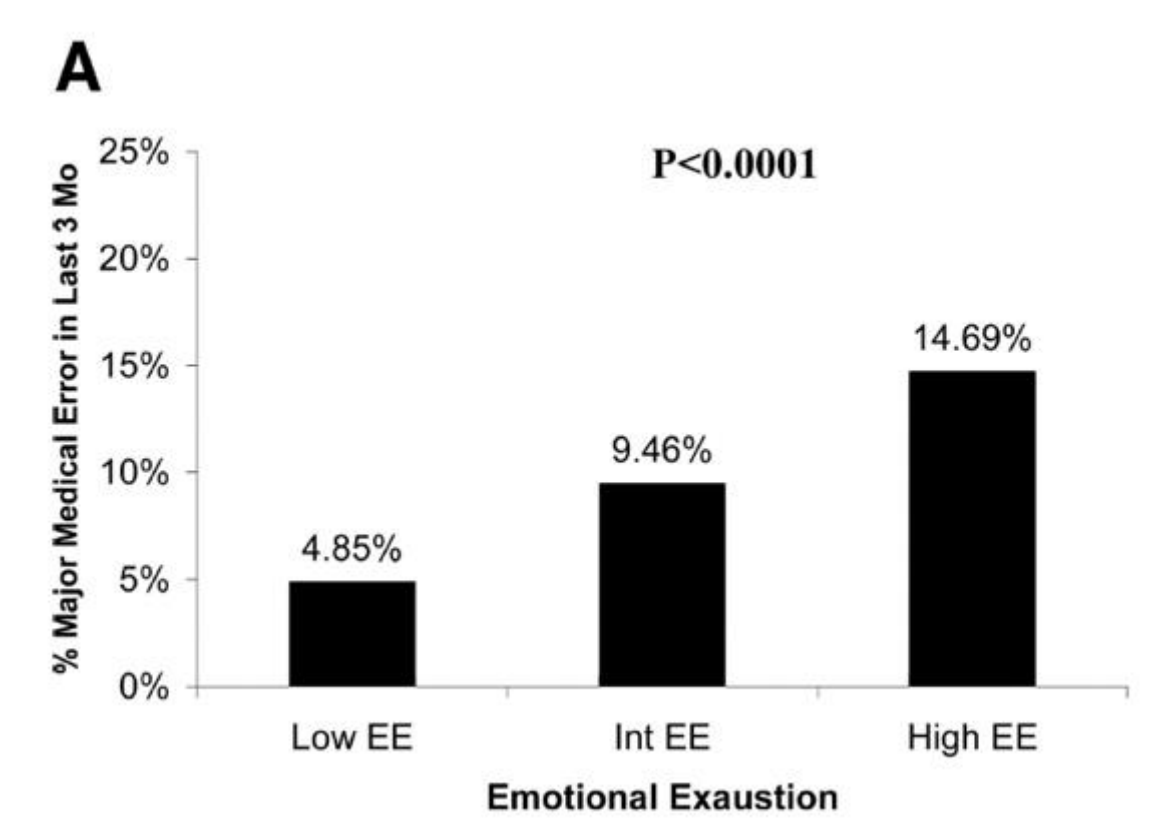
Is compassion optional in healthcare?

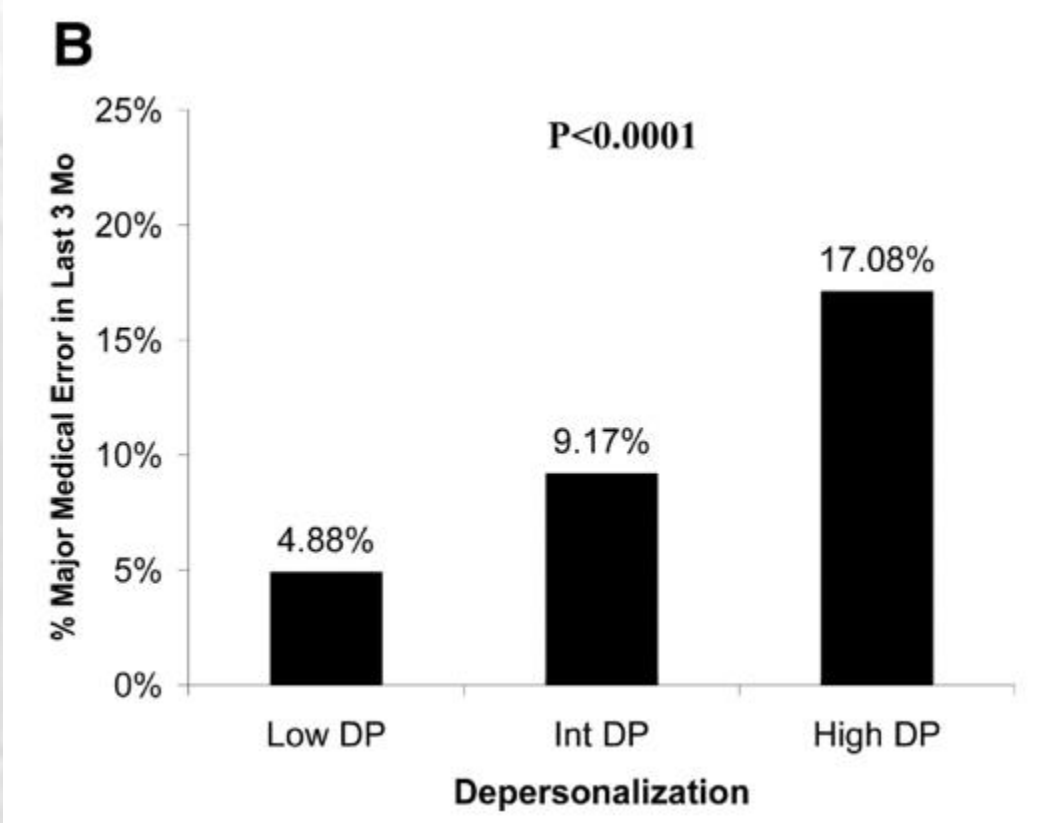
Compassion improves clinical outcomes

- Pulse and blood pressure in the CCU
- IBS symptoms
- Blood sugar control in diabetics
- Post-operative pain and length of stay
- Faster wound healing
- Immune response to vaccination



Compassion fatigue and medical errors





Shanafelt T et al, Ann Surg 2010
West C et al, JAMA 2006

Compassion matters to patients

"The staff has been so rigid and unpleasant"

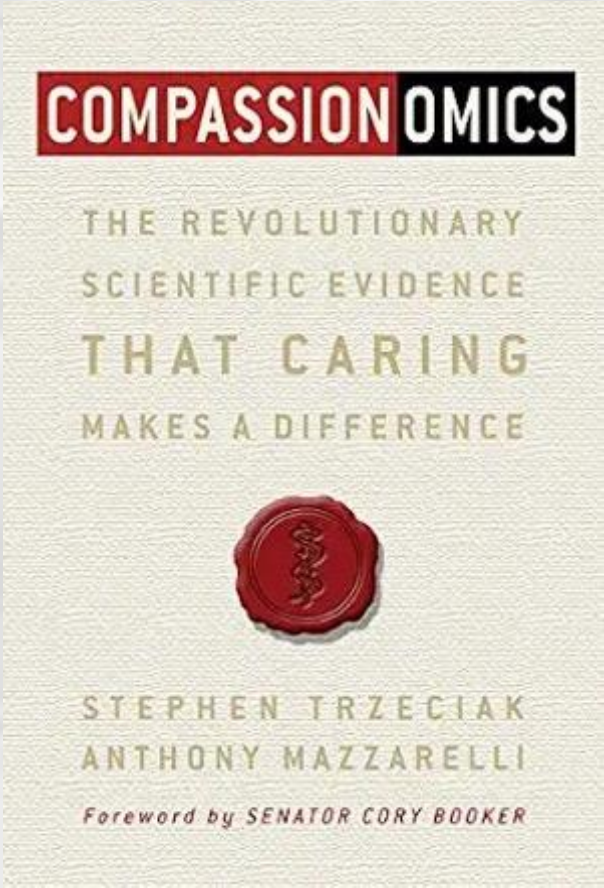
A doctor "made us feel like a burden"

"One nurse didn't even look up from her computer!"

Adam Kushner, "A Good Ending," New York Times The Morning, October 4, 2026

Compassion matters to patients

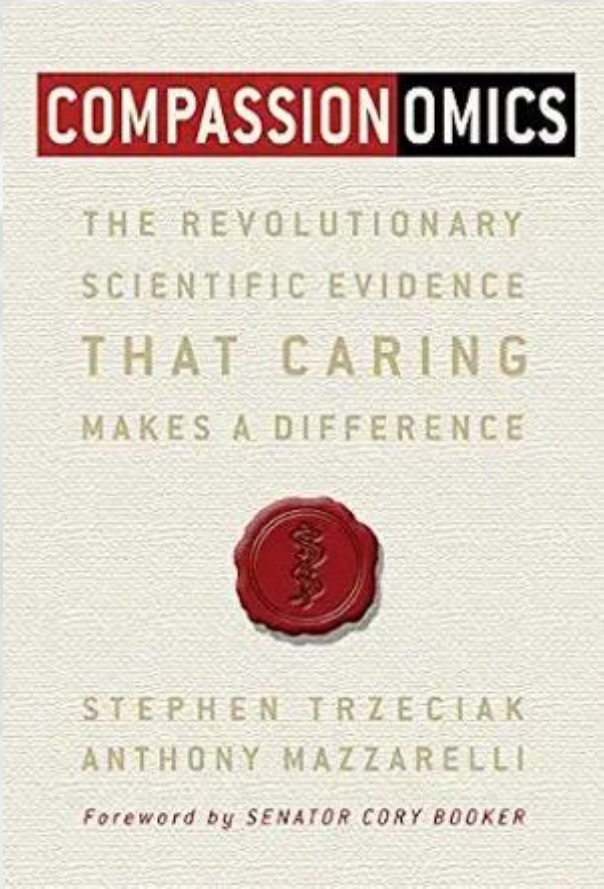
- Medicine is relational
- Compassion inspires quality communication
- Trust, confidence
- “I’m not going through this alone”
- Compassionate providers are perceived as competent



Compassionate benefits caregivers

- More fulfillment
- More resilient

- Optional?



Compassion is a form of *agápē* love

- Good will and benevolence toward another person
- love in action, motivated by the desire for another person's good
- Expecting nothing in return



https://elm.umaryland.edu/elm-stories/2026/Compassion-in-Challenging-Times.php

What *agápē* looks like

Love is patient, love is kind. . . It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

- 1 Corinthians 13

Compassion brings meaning to our work

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

- 1 Corinthians 13

What if Paul had been writing to us?

If I cure thousands of patients but do not have love, I am only a sophisticated algorithm. If my professional skills are unparalleled but I do not have love, I am nothing special. If I work long hours and make a good living but do not have love, I've gained nothing at the end of the day.

Compassion makes our work meaningful

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Am I suffering from compassion fatigue?

Loss of personal connection to patients

Loss of work-related satisfaction

Increased irritability

Decreased feelings of personal accomplishment

Less energy for and engagement with life outside of work

Less enjoyment of life

Online assessment tool:
https://proqol.org/proqol-measure

“I feel worn out because of my work as a helper”

“I feel overwhelmed because my workload seems endless”

“I believe I can make a difference through my work”

“I am happy that I chose to do this work”

https://proqol.org/proqol-measure



Preventing and recovering from compassion fatigue

Respect our own human limitations

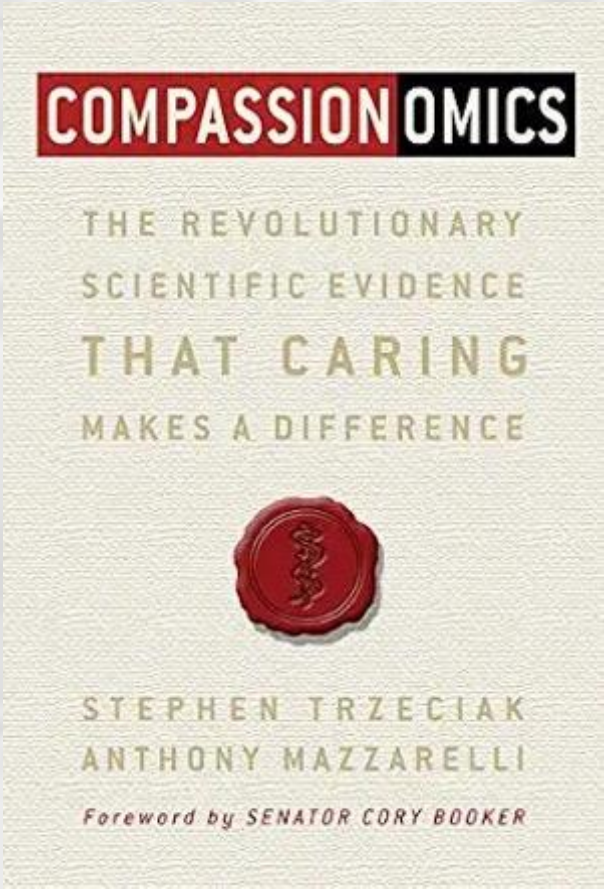
- Work hours
- Vacations

Respect our own human limitations

- Workload
- Supportive work environment

Compassion training

- Loving-kindness meditation
  - Intentionally directing compassionate thoughts toward another person
- Self-compassion training
  - When you are struggling with failure, what would your best friend say to you?
  - “I’m an idiot” vs “There’s always next time”
- Schwartz Rounds



Practice compassionate behavior

- Greet your patients
- Don’t interrupt them
- Look at your patient, not their chart or your monitor
- Ask about the person as well as the problem
  - Occupation, family, hobbies, passions, faith
  - “How was your summer?” “What do you do for fun?” “What makes your smile?”
  - Ask a follow-up question
  - “Tell me more”



Practice compassionate behavior

- Ask about patients' concerns and priorities
  - "What worries you the most?"
- Identify and respond to compassion opportunities
  - "You've been through a lot"
  - We're going to walk through this together"
  - Touch



Time affluence

Hurry steals compassion

Affluence = having plenty of something
Time affluence = the sense that you have ample time

Autonomy, Control, Flexibility

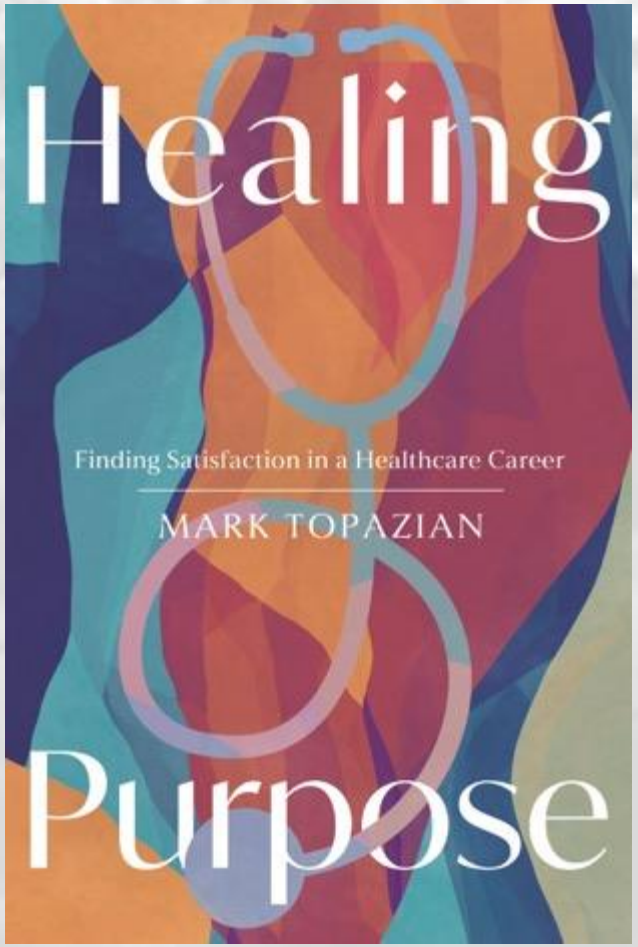
The structure of our workdays and workloads



Tim Kasser

Healthy responses to suffering

- Integrity
- Lament
- A new experience of God



Recognize God's presence while you're at work

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

- 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Recognize God's presence at your workplace

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We are conduits of compassion, not generators of compassion

Microhabits

Repent forward, before work

Connect with God during your day

- Your phone lock screen
- When washing your hands
- When logging on
- When entering a patient room
- In stressful or challenging moments

Call on the Spirit

Brother Lawrence

"We need only to recognize God intimately present with us and address ourselves to him at every moment. We need to beg His assistance for knowing His will in things doubtful and for rightly performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have completed them . . He never fails to offer us His grace at each action."

https://fsspx.asia/en/news/brother-lawrence-presence-god-part-i-29647





Evaluate this session!

