

## Exploring the Role of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence on Compassion Fatigue among Mental Health Professionals

V. MukeshKanna and A.G. Shanthi

Institute of Mental Health, Kilpauk, Chennai.

To understand the impact of empathy and emotional intelligence on compassion fatigue among mental health professionals. Mental health professionals were taken as sample for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data. Tools used were Professional Quality of Life by Stamm, The Brief emotional Intelligence Scale by Davis et al., and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire by Spreng et al. Pearson product moment correlation was done for analysing the data. Correlational analysis of the variables revealed significant positive relationships between empathy, emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue.

**Keywords:** compassion fatigue, empathy, emotional intelligence and mental health professionals

The demanding nature of mental health service places practitioners at risk of experiencing compassion fatigue, a condition marked by emotional exhaustion, reduced empathy, and diminished ability to effectively engage with clients. In the realm of mental health care, the well-being of both patients and practitioners is paramount. However, mental health professionals often find themselves walking a delicate tightrope, balancing their empathetic engagement with clients' suffering while safeguarding their own emotional health. Empathy and emotional intelligence are regarded as essential qualities in mental health practice, their relationship with compassion fatigue remains complex and multifaceted. Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the role of empathy and emotional intelligence in the development and mitigation of compassion fatigue among mental health professionals.

Empathy being the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is foundational to effective therapeutic relationships (Decety & Jackson, 2006). Mental health practitioners utilize empathy to

establish rapport, validate clients' experiences, and foster a sense of trust and safety within the therapeutic alliance (Lam et al., 2021). However, excessive empathy, if not accompanied by emotional regulation and self-care, can predispose professionals to compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995).

In relation to this, Emotional intelligence is characterized by self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 1995), which plays a crucial role in mitigating the impact of empathy on mental health professionals' well-being. Practitioners with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to recognize and manage their own emotions; also set boundaries with clients, and engage in adaptive coping strategies (Wagaman et al., 2015).

Compassion fatigue, a pervasive concern in the mental health field, refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion experienced by caregivers as a result of prolonged exposure to others' suffering (Stamm, 2010). Accordingly, Mental health professionals are constantly exposed to their

clients' trauma narratives and distressing emotions, causing them to be specifically vulnerable to compassion fatigue (Baird & Kracen, 2006). Due to this, practitioners may experience diminished job satisfaction, impaired clinical judgment, and decreased quality of care without adequate support and coping mechanisms (Joinson, 1992).

Kjeldstadli, Kristin, et al. (2006) have explored the relationship between empathy, emotional intelligence, and burnout in physicians and nurse. It was found that medical students who sustained high levels of life satisfaction perceived medical school as interfering less with their social and personal life, and were less likely to use emotion focused coping, such as wishful thinking, than their peers. Similarly, Zhu, Y., Chen, et. al (2023) in his study, have also explored the relationship between compassion fatigue, self-compassion, and compassion satisfaction among mental health professionals in Australia have found that increasing nurses' social support can decrease the prevalence of compassion fatigue.

Recognizing and addressing the roles of these constructs are essential for supporting the mental health workforce and promoting beneficial outcomes for both practitioners and the clients. By exploring these constructs within the context of mental health practice, researchers can identify risk factors, protective factors, and intervention strategies to support practitioners in maintaining their emotional resilience and sustaining their capacity for empathetic client engagement.

### **Need for the study**

The present study focuses on exploring the role of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence on Compassion Fatigue in the sample of mental health professionals, as currently this can be one of the most essential studies, since mental health professionals face chronic stress due to their

job requirement. Understanding the intricate interplay between empathy, emotional intelligence, and compassion fatigue is essential for promoting the well-being of mental health professionals and optimizing patient outcomes. While empathy and emotional intelligence are essential for building therapeutic relationships and fostering resilience, compassion fatigue poses significant challenges to practitioners' well-being and effectiveness in client care. Hence, by exploring the connection between these variables, the study would prove to be helpful in identifying factors that leads to Compassion Fatigue.

### **Aim**

To find out the relationship between Empathy, Emotional Intelligence and Compassion Fatigue among Mental Health Professionals.

### **Objectives**

- To find out the levels of empathy, emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue among mental health professionals
- To find out the relationship between empathy and emotional intelligence
- To find out the relationship between empathy and compassion fatigue
- To find out the relationship between compassion fatigue and emotional intelligence

### **Hypotheses**

- There is no significant relationship between empathy and compassion fatigue among mental health professionals
- There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue among mental health professionals

- There is no significant relationship among Empathy and Emotional Intelligence on Compassion Fatigue among Mental Health Professionals

### Method

#### Sample

78 Healthcare professionals

#### I. Inclusion criteria:

- Professionals that consented for the study
- Currently working in the field of mental health care
- Professionals in the age group between 28 to 40
- Both Male and Female

#### II. Exclusion criteria:

- Cross professionals who have shifted to mental health profession recently
- Professionals that work in non-medical field were not selected

#### Measures

*The Professional Quality of Life Scale* (PROQOL) Stamm (2010) is to measure the quality of life of professionals who work in helping professions, particularly those who deal with traumatized individuals or populations. It consists of 30 items and assesses three components of professional quality of life: Compassion Satisfaction, Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three subscales of the PROQOL range from around 0.70 to 0.90 or higher.

*The Toronto Empathy Scale* (TES) is a self-report questionnaire designed by Norman et al. (2004) to measure empathy, which is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. The scale consists of 16 items, with respondents rating each item on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The items cover various aspects

of empathy, including understanding others' emotions, sharing others' emotions, and responding compassionately to others' emotions. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of TES Cronbach Alpha is 0.70 to 0.80

*The Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale* (BEIS) developed by Wong and Law (2002). The scale aims to provide a quick and easy-to-administer tool for evaluating emotional intelligence across various contexts. It consists of 16 items, with respondents rating each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The BEIS has good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically ranging from 0.80 to 0.90

#### Procedure

The questionnaires were sent through google form to the participants which also included informed consent and the instructions for the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, followed by the purpose of the study. The confidentiality of the test was assured. SPSS statistical package was used to analyse the data collected. Pearson correlation of coefficient was computed for the data.

#### Analysis of data

The data was analysed using the SPSS software. The major statistical methods used in this study involve Pearson Correlation of Coefficient. Pearson correlation was used to find the relationship among Empathy, Compassion fatigue and Emotional Intelligence.

#### Results

Table 1. Relationship Between Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Empathy	78	42.57	6.81	-	
2. Emotional Intelligence	78	39.73	4.47	.398**	-

Note. \*\* indicates  $p < .01$

The above table shows the relationship between empathy and emotional intelligence. Results indicate a positive correlation which is significant at the level of 0.01. The correlation is at the value of .398\*\*. Thus, the hypothesis stating “There is no significant relationship between empathy and emotional intelligence among mental health professionals” is rejected.

Table 2. Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Compassion Fatigue

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Emotional Intelligence	78	39.73	4.47	-	
2. Compassion Fatigue	78	39.22	5.95	.768**	-

Note. \*\* indicates  $p < .01$

The above table shows the relationship between emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue. Results indicate a positive correlation which is significant at the level of 0.01. The correlation is at the value of .768\*\*. Thus, the hypothesis stating “There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue among mental health professionals” is rejected.

Table 3. Relationship Between empathy and compassion fatigue

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Empathy	78	42.57	6.81	-	
2. Compassion Fatigue	78	39.22	5.95	.658**	-

Note. \*\* indicates  $p < .01$

The above table shows the relationship between empathy and compassion fatigue. Results indicate a positive correlation which is significant at the level of 0.01. The correlation is at the value of .658\*\*. Thus, the hypothesis stating “There is no relationship between empathy and compassion fatigue among mental health professionals” is rejected.

## Discussion

The results indicated that there is a positive association between empathy and emotional intelligence, that is, high level of empathy is an indication of high level of emotional intelligence. This is understood, as for a person to be empathetic, he/she must understand what the other person is going through by decoding their body language, facial expressions and vocal tone. As mental health professionals, some also try providing validation accordingly by mirroring the client’s body language. This requires a significant level of emotional intelligence. Mirroring is an element of empathy, to experience another person’s emotions (Dimberg & Thurnberg, 2012).

A study by Hajibabae et al., (2018) found that a correlation between emotional intelligence and empathy among nursing students. Nurses with higher emotional intelligence tend to be better in establishing productive relationships with patients and their families, and if nurses possess empathetic skills, they manage their emotions more effectively.

Also, significant positive association was found between emotional intelligence and compassion fatigue. High level of emotional intelligence is found to be associated with high levels of compassion fatigue, that is, extreme stress or burnout from helping others. Emotionally intelligent individuals are highly sensitive to others’ emotions, that exposes them to distressing emotions. Emotional intelligence often involves effective coping strategies for managing difficult emotions. However, individuals with high EI may actively engage with emotionally challenging situations without proper emotional regulation, leading to cumulative stress and compassion fatigue over time.

A study by Beauvais et al., (2017) showed that higher levels of emotional intelligence, empathy for others’ positive emotions, and

empathy for others' negative emotions were associated with greater compassion satisfaction, only higher levels of emotional intelligence and empathy for positive emotions were associated with reduced fatigue and burnout.

High empathy levels are associated with high compassion fatigue in mental health professionals. There are various reasons that could be cited to this relationship. Highly empathetic individuals are said to utilise a significant number of emotional resources, and without proper replenishment of the same, there is high likeliness for burnout in the end. They may also over identify with others' suffering and that can lead to emotional distress (Halbesleben, 2009).

Hunt, P. A et al., (2019) researched on the topic, "Running on empathy: Relationship of empathy to compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue in cancer healthcare professionals" and a positive correlation was found between empathic concern and secondary traumatic stress. Healthcare professionals working in cancer care experience personal distress that may impact negatively on professional quality of life.

### **Implications**

The study gives us an idea about the correlation among these variables throwing light on the concept that interventions relating to emotional intelligence and empathy would work on reducing the compassion fatigue experienced by the professionals.

This study will contribute to the future researchers, focusing on the causal factors of compassion fatigue and burnout among the mental health professionals.

### **Conclusion**

The study aims to evaluate the relationship among Empathy and Emotional Intelligence on Compassion Fatigue among Mental Health Professionals and has found

that there is a correlation among all three variables. The results highlight the importance of the emotional wellbeing of the mental health professionals who are currently in practice, so that their contribution and service to those with mental health issues is refined.

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**V. MukeshKanna**, MPhil Clinical Psychology, Institute of Mental Health, Kilpauk, Chennai, E-mail Id: mukesh.mphilcp@gmail.com

**A.G. Shanthi**, Assistant Professor cum Clinical Psychologist, Department of Clinical Psychology, Institute of Mental Health, Kilpauk, Chennai.