



# Burning the Candle at Both Ends

by Kenda Riggs

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“You may not personally be experiencing the trauma, you’re seeing and you’re witnessing it. But your body doesn’t know that. It doesn’t know this isn’t my trauma.” ~ Eleanor Wells

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As teachers, you enter the field of education often feeling that it is your true vocation. You are empathic individuals with compassionate hearts. We know that teaching is one of the most rewarding professions because you tell us this every single day. However, we also hear how challenging the teaching profession has become for many of you. From the moment you pull into the school parking lot, you are in “teacher mode” which lasts long after students leave the school building. In society, this is often one of the biggest misperceptions of teaching, as even though the school day ends, the work for teachers continues. Throughout the day, there can be some wonderful magical teaching moments with students, along with some really difficult emotional moments. This is because some students come to school every day experiencing a variety of challenges, including living in poverty, a history of maltreatment, bullying, traumas, or unpredictability in their lives. Teachers carry their students through the good and the difficult times as educators, mentors, carers, nurturers, coaches, and helpers. Yet, teachers are often on autopilot, continuing day in and day out – burning the candle at both ends - until something physical or psychological happens that makes them realize that something just doesn’t *feel* right. You may not be able to name exactly what is happening, but something feels different inside of you. This is where many of you silently suffer, knowing something is not feeling quite right but continue to teach, unaware that you may be experiencing the effects of compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress.

In November/December 2020, I wrote an article for the NLTA bulletin at that time called “*The Cost of Caring*.” The focus of this article was to highlight the emotional toll that teaching can have on you as first responders to students’ lived experiences and their stress and emotional needs. Your students’ stories can have a significant impact on you physically and psychologically over time. Due to this, many teachers

are at risk of developing compassion fatigue, which is the profound emotional and physical erosion that occurs when you are not able to refuel or restore your energy. Secondary traumatic stress, on the other hand, is the emotional distress that may occur inside of you when you hear the firsthand trauma experiences of others. It is important to recognize that secondary traumatic stress can happen to any teacher who is repeatedly exposed to the trauma stories experienced by their students.

Some common symptoms of compassion fatigue or the effects of secondary traumatic stress can be physical and emotional fatigue, feelings of sadness or irritability, difficulty sleeping, feeling overwhelmed, a loss of interest in teaching or life activities, repetitive visualization of a student’s trauma(s), hypervigilance, brain fog, feeling detached, and/or feelings of professional inadequacy. Experiencing ongoing compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress can lead to burnout, a path that many of you as teachers may be journeying with or without your awareness. Teacher burnout is a growing concern in education, and the accumulative effects of experiencing compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress can include overall daily exhaustion with feelings of low job satisfaction, feelings of powerlessness, and overwhelming emotions at and about your work. When you experience burnout, you may feel disconnected from your students and colleagues, and ultimately, have difficulty teaching effectively. It can often feel like you just don’t have it in you to teach and support your students. This is why early intervention is so very important, as the focus must be on restoring your energy towards your recovery physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially, and pro-socially.

## Current Reality

With the high level of stress in schools, the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic

stress, and burnout is real for teachers. Within our own Employee Assistance Program for Teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, referrals and supports for teacher mental health interventions are at an all-time high. Of the over 6,500 teachers in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, approximately 1,500 were active in the program during the 2022-23 school year, and the numbers of teachers accessing the program this 2023-24 school year are continuing to rise. In addition to working through a global COVID-19 health pandemic, we are also experiencing a mental health pandemic in education. The Canadian Mental Health Association indicates that 1 in 5 Canadians are living with a mental health issue. Currently, in our education system, the EAP statistics show that we have exceeded this, with more than 1 in 5 teachers accessing mental health supports in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The good news is that you, as teachers, are utilizing support from your Employee Assistance Program and accessing counselling benefits through your NLTA Group Insurance plan or other insurance plans that you may have. However, the statistics are alarming, and it is even more alarming that we know that many of you are still silently suffering, continuing to burn the candle at both ends.

In 2022, the NLTA conducted research on the mental health and well-being of teachers, whereby, through a survey and a series of focus groups, stress levels were explored. When asked to rate the level of stress experienced during the school year on a scale from one (not at all stressed) to ten (extremely stressed), the average reported number was nine. Lack of support, behavioural needs of students, and increased workload and demands on professional time ranked highly among the identified causes of increased stress (NLTA 2023). In addition to these stressors, one of the many conversations we have with teachers almost every single day revolves around your feelings of having little left to give to your work. We also hear you when you talk about your experiences of bearing witness to the trauma stories of your students. Many of you as teachers may not be fully aware of the impact of these accumulative traumas as you hold their stories closely in your hearts.

### Strategies to Help

Recognizing symptoms of compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress in yourself or others is of utmost importance, as early recognition and intervention can help lead to a quicker recovery time. Like medical conditions that we may experience, the key to healing is recovery. Many teachers continue to silently suffer, continuing to burn the candle at both ends, and this stress takes its toll on your mind, body,

and soul. Some teachers need to take time off work to recover, and some teachers can continue to work with a shift in focus on their own health and well-being, often with mental health supports in place. The most important piece is to not carry this suffering alone.

Some key strategies to help cope with compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress are: striving to have a strong social support network both at home and at work; increased self-awareness; engaging in positive self-talk; starting good wholistic self-care for yourself which may include using health benefits from your insurance plan such as massage therapy and counselling; incorporating more movement into your day including stretching and exercise; closely examining your work-life integration; starting a gratitude journal; taking up a hobby of something you would love to do; setting personal and workplace boundaries; and accessing counselling mental health supports to help you process your own professional and personal lived experiences to put well-being goals in place for yourself. When coping with compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress as a teacher, you have to slow down your busy pace and put on your brakes (no one can do this for you). This means practicing stopping, even for moments throughout each day. Although this sounds like an easy thing to do, when you are feeling overworked and overburdened, it can be one of the most challenging things to do. Stopping allows us to pause, reflect, reset, and authentically check in with ourselves about how we are feeling and doing.

Most importantly, you do not need to suffer in silence and carry this stress alone. In the EAP for Teachers program, our commitment to you is to keep this conversation going about this hidden reality of teaching regarding your experiences of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. We are committed to continuing to write, talk about, and advocate for more supports pertaining to the mental health and well-being of teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. Please confidentially reach out to your EAP Coordinators, Lori Hewitt or Kenda Riggs, if you require support and we will help you with getting started on moving forward with your healing and wellness.

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### References

Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association - *The Hidden Reality - Pre-Budget Submission (Feb 2023)*