

The Invisible Kryptonite Among “Super” Helpers the Healers of Humanity: Advocating for “Super” Helpers to Practice What They Preach to Clients?

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Introduction

In the movie Superman is portrayed as being fully human but possesses superhuman powers. He originated from a planet called Krypton. The strangest thing is that the geographical origin of his birth is the same thing that is used to zap him of his strength, his ability to move, incapacitate him eventually leading to his demise. This scenario is very similar to helpers or shall I say “super” helpers that practice compassion in an unconditional manner but runs high risks of suffering from compassion fatigue. A “super” helper can be defined as an individual that assist those who help or serve others in a specific capacity. “Super” helpers are teachers, doctors, nurses, clergy, mental health clinicians, psychologists.

Although the term “super” helper sounds great it raises a concern. Research has shown that many in the helping profession do not apply what they encourage others to do. In the past, I conducted a small research project among mental health counselors who serve traumatized children. I found that many of the mental health professionals answered the self-reporting assessments in a non-honest manner. Many who I personally heard and witnessed complaining about work satisfaction experienced work fatigue and displayed cynicism. This indicates the failure to implement deeper levels of self-care that was beyond recreational activities. I could not reciprocate in research what I was hearing and seeing as a researcher. Individuals who help others need to stop and take care of themselves when the need arises, i.e. self-care. Helpers and “super” helpers are trained to work out of an emotional state of compassion for humanity. However, while “super” helpers are helping those afflicted by traumatic experiences they may experience the client’s or patient’s trauma mentally and emotionally this phenomenon can be compared to transference and countertransference. Exerting compassion on a continual basis and not practicing self-care can decrease energy levels among “super” helpers leaving them fatigued mentally, emotionally and physically.

Can one conclude that compassion can be viewed as negative? The answer is compassion is not negative. What can be viewed as negative is how “super helpers” negate the effect that giving, extending compassion toward many can affect them mentally

and emotionally. Compassion is a good trait to have, all of humanity should practice and extend compassion toward each other. Moreover, compassion has always existed, some will argue that it is innate while others will argue that it taught i.e. learned. People of the Christian faith would argue that compassion comes from the creator of the universe while scientists and philosophers would argue it is learned. Regardless of the origin of compassion, a person in the helping profession cannot function without it. Practicing compassion without taking the time to practice self-care can only lead to consequences of possible compassion fatigue.

Compassion and Compassion Fatigue

There are many definitions for compassion but for this article compassion will be used with the understanding that compassion is an inward desire to help improve humanity and the societal conditions humanity lives. Mother Teresa is a pivotal example of practicing such, however, no one really knows if she ever suffered from compassion fatigue. Improving societal conditions is what those who have been persuaded with compassion seeks to accomplish [1].

Researchers have reported that improving societal conditions has been the goal of helpers and healers for centuries, especially among ingenious populations. Some researchers have reported

that helpers are perceived as healers or miracle workers in some capacity. When healing transpires energy and power is released. There is a positive transition that occurs between the “helper” and the recipient. This transition that occurs is a powerful act. However, like Superman what is part of his nature can also become detrimental to him if he does not protect himself. The Native Americans believe that when a person heals someone they give a piece of themselves until at some point, he or she will require healing” [2].

“Super” Helpers such as social workers, counselors, therapist, psychologists, doctors, nurses, laypersons, clergy assist humanity each year. There are rewards for helping humanity. Sometimes the cost can outweigh the rewards when working with specific clients. The aftermath of this occurrence known as compassion fatigue leaves the “super” helper emotionally and mentally injured. Having and exhibiting compassion among helping professionals is a must. There must be a balance on how to extrapolate compassion to prevent compassion fatigue. Giving a piece of one’s self for the sake of healing others is great although having a guileless view of self while helping and providing healing can be dangerous. This type of behavior can lead to a pretentious (emotional and mental) martyrdom view of self from the helper. It appears that “super” helpers could use more training on how to implement a balanced view of helping in the workplace. Even graduate training programs can also implement more a balanced view of helping which would help decrease damage such as compassion fatigue among the helper and healer. As “super” helpers express, empathy, over time the “super” helper may begin to experience compassion fatigue which he or she may mistake as burnout. However, compassion fatigue is distinct from burnout. Compassion fatigue occurs in a subtle manner and many times dismissed as burnout so more awareness need to occur among “super” helpers regarding the difference between experiencing burnout and compassion fatigue [3-6].

Among mental health professionals compassion fatigue has become the latest research craze as if it is has evolved within the last 20 years. However, compassion fatigue has existed for decades... Compassion fatigue occurs over stages of time and the “super” helper maybe unaware of such a phenomenon. This phenomenon can be described as a stress response that shows the cost of caring for humanity emotionally. This “cost of caring” has led professionals to abandon their work with humanity that has suffered at the hands of traumatic experiences [7,8].

The reality is that “super” helpers are human as well and even doctors, nurses, firemen, police officers, counselors, teachers, clergy all need to talk to someone in the counseling profession. So, I asked the question who does the counselor talk to? Do they seek out another in the profession to talk to or try to self-analyze and fix the problem because after all, they know what to do? Do counselors and other “super” helpers conclude “I need to talk to someone because a changed has occurred in my life and it is not a good change”? This is only the beginning of self-care.

Although self-care is very therapeutic, it appears to be a casual term tossed around among “helpers and healers. Self-care often is expressed and viewed as tools or methods used to gain or increase in a social manner and lose the level of effectiveness based on how it is implemented. If not, careful self-care can deemphasize the therapeutic levels that consist of deep reflection, insight into self and others that create a desire to change, to be more productive in a healthy manner [9]. A holistic approach to self-care can be effective if “super” helpers not only addresses the physical and psychological aspects but also the social, emotional, creativity, intellectual, and spiritual. Researchers suggest that “super” helpers seek and find key elements that would promote self-care and incorporate them into their daily lives, this is easier said than done. Many of the “super” helpers are not able to take vacations or paid time off as needed due to financial and family obligations. Many are not able to talk with friends or family about work due to confidentiality, many “super” helpers may struggle with finding the help needed as often as they needed it. Our communities need to provide an oasis for helpers and “super” helpers to regenerate themselves on a mental and emotional level so they can continue to provide compassion effectively [10].

Conclusion

Expressing compassion and providing empathy toward individuals is the human expression of caring and the act of love. However, “super” helpers and healers who provide extreme levels of compassion towards humanity and are usually the last to report doing so and are at high risk of hurting themselves emotionally and mentally. More research on how self-care among “super” helpers can be implemented to decrease the possibilities of individuals in the helping professions encountering compassion fatigue is needed within workforce. As well it is also important to stress the necessity of self-care and implementing the procedures that would bring it about.

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