

Compassion Fatigue Is Visible in Philanthropy

La fatigue de compassion est visible en philanthropie

March 24, 2026 · By Daniel H. Lanteigne

This is an AI-generated English translation of Daniel H. Lanteigne's original French-language column, provided for reference. Read the original in French on Les Affaires → <https://www.lesaffaires.com/opinions/la-fatigue-de-compassion-est-visible-en-philanthropie/>

There's growing talk of compassion fatigue in the medical field. In fact, it was through the podcast *Soigner jusqu'à se briser* (Caring Until You Break), by Dr. Steven Palanchuck, that this concept first reached my ears. For caregivers, the reality generally creeps in insidiously. These are dedicated, competent, committed professionals... who eventually burn out from constantly caring for others.

But this reality doesn't stop at the hospital doors. It quietly makes its way into charitable organizations too. And no one talks about it.

A Fatigue We Don't Name

Compassion fatigue isn't simply being tired. Nor is it a lack of resilience or an inability to manage stress. Even less is it victimhood. It's the exhaustion that sets in when someone is repeatedly exposed to the suffering of others. When you listen, when you carry it, when you absorb it. And then start again, day after day.

Unlike classic professional burnout, which often stems from an excessive workload, compassion fatigue is directly linked to empathy. The more engaged you are, the more at risk you are. In other words, it isn't the most fragile people who break down. It's often the most invested ones.

Same Mechanism, Different Field

At first glance, comparing a caregiver to a philanthropy professional might seem like a stretch, I'll admit. And yet.

In both cases, you work up close with human vulnerability. Illness. Poverty. Isolation. Violence. Psychological distress. The realities differ, but the exposure is constant. In both cases, there's an implicit moral pressure. Help. Fix. Make a difference. Don't give up. In both cases, resources are limited. The needs are not.

And in both cases, there's that sense of calling. A deep, often personal commitment that goes far beyond any job description. That's where the trap closes in. Because when a calling meets persistent structural constraints, burnout isn't a deviation. It's a consequence.

An Organizational Risk

The problem is that compassion fatigue is still too often treated as an individual issue. We talk about managing stress better. About self-care. About being more resilient.

But we avoid asking the real question: what are we doing about the environments that burn people out?

In the philanthropic sector, the warning signs are quite visible. High turnover in fundraising teams. Difficulty recruiting and retaining experienced talent. Loss of institutional memory. Strained donor relationships. Constant pressure to deliver results.

And we know full well that a burnt-out team doesn't build a sustainable philanthropic culture. And that's a business issue that should concern all of us as a society. Because beyond the human impact, there's a very real cost.

It's no coincidence that lawmakers are now paying attention to this. With Bill 27, Quebec now recognizes psychosocial risks at work as a full-fledged issue, on par with physical risks. In other words, what many people were experiencing in silence is finally becoming an organizational responsibility.

And this unease is no longer silent. The Le communautaire à boutte! ("The Community Sector at Its Breaking Point!") movement is putting words to a reality many are already living: the sector is out of breath.

Think about it: the paradox is brutal. We expect (we even demand!) compassion from systems that, paradoxically, wear it down.

What Needs to Change

Recognizing compassion fatigue is already a first step. But it isn't enough. We need to go further. On the organizational side, that means clearly naming the phenomenon.

Adjusting expectations. Creating spaces where teams can set down what they're carrying. Training managers to recognize the signs before it's too late. On the leadership side, it means rethinking what we value. Commitment shouldn't be measured by one's capacity to burn out. Limits aren't a problem. They're a condition for sustainability.

And on the sector's side, it's time to break the silence. To stop glorifying sacrifice as an unspoken norm. And to recognize that taking care of the people who help others isn't a luxury. It's a necessity.

And Where Do Donors Fit In?

Donors aren't outside of this reality. Without meaning to, certain dynamics contribute to the pressure felt on the ground. Constant urgency. High expectations. The premium placed on quick results. The proliferation of requests.

Supporting a cause isn't just about funding projects. It's also about supporting the people who carry them.

That means more human, less transactional relationships. A better understanding of organizational realities. Funding that covers capacity, not just programs. Because a strong organization starts with a healthy team.

Helping Shouldn't Be Exhausting

Compassion fatigue isn't a weakness. It's a signal that something in the way we do things needs to be revisited. The medical field is starting to talk about it. To question itself. To adjust. Philanthropy can't afford to wait.

Because in the end, a philanthropy that burns out the very people who keep it alive isn't sustainable—no matter how noble its mission.

Daniel H. Lanteigne · Indice philanthropique, Les Affaires · March 24, 2026