How compassion fatigue is harming Australia's teachers

By Glenys Oberg



Teachers' jobs involve more than just teaching the required curriculum. A significant part of their role includes providing emotional support to their students.

And with many students facing mental health challenges and experiencing trauma, meeting these emotional needs has become increasingly difficult.

My research investigates compassion fatigue among Australian teachers. This condition — which involves a reduced ability to empathise with others — can develop when people face ongoing emotional and psychological strain.

How is compassion fatigue impacting our teachers? And what can be done to address it?

What is compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is a term for the physical, emotional and psychological impact of helping others who are under stress or experiencing trauma.

While this condition is commonly associated with healthcare workers, first responders and psychologists, teachers are also at risk.

Compassion fatigue involves two related conditions: burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

Burnout is characterised by emotional exhaustion, de-personalisation and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Secondary traumatic stress mirrors symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It occurs when teachers hear about or witness their students' trauma and begin to experience symptoms like emotional numbing, intrusive thoughts or avoidance behaviours.

What is happening in Australian schools?

Children with trauma and poor mental health make up a significant part of Australian classrooms.

A 2023 Australian Bureau of Statistics study found 38.8 per cent of 16-to-24-year-olds had experienced a mental disorder within the last 12 months, an increase on previous studies.

That same year, a Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne survey revealed one in three children between eight and 13 experienced symptoms of a mental health problem.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study also found 40 per cent of young Australians aged 16–24 had experienced more than one type of abuse, such as physical violence or neglect. Other research shows during 2019 and 2020 about three per cent of Australian children received child protection services.

Managing outbursts and trauma

This means teachers are regularly managing emotional and behavioural crises in classrooms. This might include student meltdowns, violent outbursts or other disruptive behaviours.

Teachers are also exposed to their students' traumatic experiences while trying to provide support. Research shows these interactions significantly contribute to stress and anxiety among educators.

Australian research has highlighted how compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary traumatic stress are significant factors pushing teachers out of the profession.

These issues don't just impact teachers they also affect students. When teachers are highly stressed, research shows students are more likely to behave poorly in the classroom and record lower academic performance.

My research

In early 2023, I surveyed 1,612 Australian teachers to understand how compassion fatigue affects their emotional wellbeing. I also conducted interviews with 57 teachers later in the year to gain deeper insights in a study, which is yet to be published.

Teachers in my study worked across the country, though most were from Queensland primary schools. More than 93 per cent of respondents were women.

I found 73.9 per cent of respondents had moderate-to-high levels of burnout when compared to the general population, while 71.5 per cent were exhibiting signs of secondary traumatic stress.

These results align with findings from other research. For example, a 2024 study on Victorian teachers reported similar rates.

While additional research is needed to fully understand the scope of this problem in different types of schools and different locations, these findings suggest compassion fatigue and related issues are affecting a significant proportion of Australian teachers.

Extreme and very real

Teachers who had compassion fatigue, spoke about how their emotional state was deeply influenced by the emotional needs and behaviours of their students. As one teacher told us: "The students that I am caring for at the moment are a very hard cohort. My compassion fatigue is extreme and very real at the moment. I am exhausted."

Another teacher noted how they could gauge how the day would go, based on the mood of their students: "When they're struggling, I find it hard to keep my own emotions in check."

One teacher explained the difficulty of managing student behaviour while dealing with emotional exhaustion: "When behaviour blows up, which it does several times a day, I just don't know if I have the energy to respond compassionately."

It’s frustrating

Teachers described a tension between providing emotional support to students and needing to teach the required curriculum and meet administrative responsibilities: “It’s frustrating knowing what the students need emotionally, but the curriculum and administrative demands don’t leave room for that kind of support.”

This also reflects a broader issue for teachers – who increasingly note how the pressure to constantly provide data about what they are doing limits their ability to focus on their students in general.

Impossible to switch off

Because of the intensity of the issues they encounter, teachers find it difficult to leave their work at work. As one interviewee told us: “The emotional load from school often follows me home. I find it hard to stop thinking about my students, even when I’m supposed to be relaxing.”

Some teachers also feel like they should not be relaxing (out-of-hours) when their students need help: “It’s hard to focus on self-care when I know my students are struggling. I feel guilty taking time for myself when I should be helping them.”

What can we do?

Supporting teachers who experience compassion fatigue requires a combination of three things.

1. Trauma-informed training: This can equip teachers with strategies to address trauma in their classrooms while also protecting their own mental health. Studies have shown trauma-informed approaches can improve teacher resilience and reduce burnout.

2. Mental health support: Teachers should have access to counselling services and peer networks where they can share their experiences and receive guidance. Programs like “reflective circles”, which offer structured opportunities to process emotional challenges have been shown to be particularly effective in reducing stress and improving wellbeing for teachers.

3. Systemic changes: Schools can reduce workloads, offer better administrative support and recognise the emotional labour involved in teaching. Research shows these changes help teachers manage their stress and enhance “compassion satisfaction”. This is the opposite of compassion fatigue and is the rewarding feeling of making a difference in students’ lives.

Understanding the toll of compassion fatigue and supporting teachers’ wellbeing ensures they can continue providing essential care and guidance to students.

Glenys Oberg is a PhD candidate in education and trauma at The University of Queensland. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU or SSTUWA. This article was first published on The Conversation website and has been reproduced here with permission.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.



Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026