

## ABSTRACT

TITLE: Professional Quality of Life: An Assessment of Compassion Fatigue and Self-Care Among Registered Dietitian Nutritionists

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Compassion fatigue (CF) is commonly experienced among those in the helping professions due to the high pressure and relational nature of their work environments. Among helping professionals where CF has been well-studied (e.g., nurses and social workers), CF has been associated with negative physical, psychological, and professional consequences. Self-care practices are inversely associated with CF, and self-care interventions have shown promise to decrease levels of CF among helping professionals. Compassion fatigue and self-care have not been well studied in registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs). The purpose of this mixed methods study was to assess RDNs' awareness and current level of CF and identify their current self-care practices through an online survey and virtual mini focus groups. A sample of 96 RDNs affiliated with the Indiana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics participated in the survey, and five survey respondents participated in the subsequent virtual mini focus groups. Findings revealed that nearly half of participants surveyed had a previous awareness of CF, while a greater proportion had a previous awareness of self-care. Participants reported relatively good professional quality of life with moderate average levels of compassion satisfaction, low to moderate average levels of burnout, and low average levels of secondary traumatic stress. The

participants reported engaging in various forms of self-care with behaviors from the Supportive Relationship and Supportive Structure domains reported as the most common forms of self-care. Additionally, higher Mindful Self-Care Scale scores were positively correlated with compassion satisfaction and inversely correlated with burnout and secondary traumatic stress among the sample. The virtual mini focus group participants perceived that RDNs are at risk for CF and expressed they believe it is important for RDNs and dietetics students to learn about their professional risk for CF as well as strengths and strategies to improve self-care for personal and professional wellbeing. In conclusion, although participants reported relatively high professional quality of life and currently engage in self-care behaviors, participants perceived compassion fatigue as an occupational risk and believe self-care is important for maintaining their wellbeing and mitigating compassion fatigue.