

TOO CLOSE: COMPASSION FATIGUE

SUMMARY: Setting realistic boundaries and dealing with compassion fatigue.

CASE TYPE: Reflective

Reflective cases are internally oriented. These cases invite reflection on one's own place in community engaged work. They typically will not have clear 'right' answers and are open to many interpretations.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boundaries• Compassion Fatigue• Encountering Limits	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Recognize signs of compassion fatigue and emotional overextension.2. Reflect on the importance of establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries in service roles or during immersive experiences.3. Identify personal and institutional support systems that can help students navigate emotionally challenging situations.4. Recognize and engage with realistic limits that are encountered through community engagement.

SCENARIO

Anneka is a junior studying neuroscience and behavior. She has always had a passion for working with youth, and wants to use her education to promote medical equity for children with traumatic backgrounds. She intends to go to medical school and specialize in pediatric psychiatry. She is excited to have been accepted for a prestigious community engagement program during the summer, which will place her in a group home for preteen girls who are part of the foster care system. Anneka feels this will be a perfect opportunity to partner with an organization working on the social issues she is passionate about, while also gaining valuable experience for her future career.

After a week in the group home, Anneka is already feeling stretched. The environment is not just emotionally demanding, but also chaotic, and clearly suffering from a lack of consistent leadership. Despite this, she is enjoying herself and can see her growth daily. In her second week, Anneka begins to see a particularly strong bond forming with one of the girls. Anneka begins spending more time with this resident, and is enthusiastic as she sees her opening up more and more. However, this resident then begins to confide in Anneka about serious family issues when she was younger. She recounts past instances of physical and emotional abuse in her family of origin, the ensuing experiences with police, social workers, and the courts that followed, and how that trauma still is impacting her and causing her anxiety. Anneka suddenly realizes she is far outside her depth. She is feeling emotionally drained and unsure of how to maintain healthy boundaries. But she realizes this has already gone too far, and that the resident sees her as a confidant and trusted friend. She is afraid that if she reaches out to others for help, the resident will feel betrayed and retreat further into her shell. But she also recognizes she is not personally or professionally equipped to respond properly on her own.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is compassion fatigue?
2. How do you support others while protecting your own mental health? What are the signs that tell you that you're reaching your emotional limit? What coping or self-care practices help you reset?
3. What might you do if you reached a moment like this where you can recognize you have reached the limit of your own knowledge or experience?
4. How does guilt or pressure play into your desire to "be there" for someone? Where is the line between relationship building and emotional overinvolvement?
5. What boundaries are important in immersive or service-based roles? How do you communicate or enforce boundaries without abandoning someone who is vulnerable? If boundaries have not been established, how can you do so in a reasonable way once things have gone too far?
6. What systems or people can you turn to for support in difficult situations? Who are the people (supervisors, peers, mental health professionals) you can reach out to?
7. What would make you feel hesitant to seek help or set boundaries?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **NORMALIZE THE STRUGGLE.** Many students may feel ashamed or guilty about feeling emotionally exhausted, especially during short-term placements. Compassion fatigue is a normal response to sustained emotional labor. It can be a byproduct of investing oneself in addressing structures of injustice and requires balance and perspective.
- **ENCOURAGE OPENNESS.** Ask students to name specific emotions they might feel in this scenario (e.g., guilt, sadness, confusion, helplessness).
- **SEEK MUTUALITY.** Remind students that they are encountering others but also being encountered themselves—it is realistic and natural to create reasonable expectations for how others treat you, just like you do for them.
- **REFRAME BOUNDARIES.** Setting boundaries is not a rejection of care; it's a practice of sustainable compassion.
- **LIVE IN THE TENSION.** Catholic social tradition challenges us to live in the tension between deep empathy and best practice—students need guidance as they balance the desire to be authentically present with the need for realistic, professional boundaries.
- **FIND SUPPORT NETWORKS.** Point students toward campus or programmatic resources (e.g., counselors, supervisors, mentors) that exist to support them.
- **UNDERSTAND MANDATORY REPORTING.** Although this case does not involve encountering an instance of current or ongoing abuse, it is important to ensure that students are aware of the existence of mandatory reporting roles. This is something they should be aware of if their role involves minors. Point them to the case "[Should I Speak Up?](#)"

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- Is the role of accompaniment and presence as practiced through Catholic social tradition at odds with the idea of professional or personal boundaries? How might you see them as complementary or oppositional?
- What boundary-setting strategy or support option do you want to try or strengthen?