

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Pity Fatigue

By Janet "Kaye" Love, LPC

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Pity, it is a complex subject. It arises out of a true sense of compassion and caring. Yet the attempt to bond through a perception of misfortune creates a bitter experience for everyone involved. Although the signs of pity may be hard to define objectively, you know it when it is directed at you.

Have you ever thought "oh this must be horrible, look at the sad faces of everyone around me?" Have you ever found yourself exhausted at the end of the day because in addition to the stress you are experiencing due to some unwanted, unpleasant, maybe even traumatic event, you have to deal with people becoming horribly distressed when they see you or hear of your situation? Have you ever experienced a sinking feeling of shame that occurs as a result of others looking at you like your life is not worth living? Have you ever avoided people because you cannot stand any more sad faces? Then you know pity is not pretty.

This is the story of how I discovered the phenomenon of Pity Fatigue, and vowed that I would no longer allow myself to be affected by sad responses from people around me, nor would I perpetrate pity on others. So, if you feel like a pity provoker, or if you are a pity perpetrator, I want you to know that there is hope.

While I may not look like a pity provoker, I have a long history with the experience of pity. When I was 9 I hit my head, and began to have seizures. I would awaken injured, mute, and blind. During this dark period when I was unable to respond, there was always a crowd of people talking about how awful it was, it should not be happening, such a pitiful condition. The first thing I saw was always looks of terror. That same look appeared whenever I talked about seizures. I also remember seeing the sad expressions of others when they saw people with other disabilities, and hearing comments about how pitiful they were. I remember knowing that I too was a pitiful purveyor of sadness to others.

I did not connect these reactions of others to my experience of low self-worth as a teenager. I just thought in addition to being epileptic, I was mentally unstable. It was all I could do not to join the party and pity myself. However, I was committed to learn not to be miserable. I was determined not to go through life feeling pathetic. I would write affirmations about being ok how I am, and tell myself positive things, yet I still had the feeling that I was less than others. I increased

my efforts to feel better through my 20s by reading self-help books, and getting therapy. The experience of myself as pitiful lessened with effort, yet it lingered.

Because I had seen a lot of people who seemed like they could really benefit from learning to be happier, I entered graduate school to become a psychotherapist. One day in class my professor said, "We learn about ourselves from the facial expressions of others" this statement lingered in my mind as I left. After class, someone asked me about a huge bruise on my leg, as large purple and green blotches made frequent appearances on my body. I said, "oh, I get those all the time, I have seizures. I thrash about and run into things. This was a not really a big deal to me, I was used to it. Then... there it was. Vicarious trauma all over their faces, as they said, "How awful that must be, how sad you have to endure it, I don't know if I could handle it" As I saw the bitter looks on their faces, I experienced a sinking feeling of shame for causing their discomfort, then flashed back to the lecture; We learn about ourselves from the facial expressions of others! I thought "that is it!" It is not about me at all! It is the reaction of others, at that moment I realized I am not pitiful, I am just responding to their negative reactions.

I became very curious about this phenomena, and started on a quest to explore it. When out in public I would watch the look on people's faces when they saw or heard about disability. Some people just look up overhead, like they hope to avoid knowledge of something unpleasant. Some divert their eyes downward, like they are ashamed of the judgment they are making. Some people furrow their brow and stare, as if they see problem to solve. Watching these distorted faces day after day after day is exhausting. Just as professionals who deal with trauma on a regular basis get Compassion Fatigue, I propose that people with conditions others perceive as unfortunate, are subject to a vicarious stress condition I call Pity Fatigue.

Now when I see that sequenced up face that says "oh how bad for you, I remember that they are mired in their own fear, and attempting to bond through the bitterness they feel. They are unable to focus the sweetness of gifts that result from overcoming obstacles. They may lack the skills to adjust and be happy. I know that look is not about me or my situation.

When I see others who are facing something that looks difficult for me I remember that they have strengths and gifts I do not know of, and I become curious about who they are. I choose to bond with the unseen sweetness which

lies beyond what is bitter at first encounter. Then I look them in the eyes and smile.

My psyche is now pity proof. I no longer perceive myself as a pity provoker, nor do I perpetrate pity on other people. The next time you see someone in a situation you perceive as unpleasant, I invite you to move past the bitterness, become curious about the sweetness and be more balanced in your attempts to bond.