# Imagine: Compassion Fatigue Training for Nurses

Ann Marie Lee Walton, RN, MPH, OCN®, CHES, and Mimi Alvarez, RN, MSN, PMHCNS-BC

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The residency program for oncology nurses at University of North Carolina Healthcare is comprehensive. New graduate nurses in the inpatient setting undergo 13 weeks of orientation with two primary preceptors on the unit and then meet monthly for four hours of didactic learning and support for the first 12 months. The nurse educators who planned this residency wanted to create a celebration that would encourage reflection on the past year and teach self-care strategies as well.

Mimi Alvarez, RN, MSN, PMHCNS-BC, a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist with the Comprehensive Cancer Support Program, has developed a presentation for the nurses on compassion fatigue. Alvarez's presentation addresses the risks of passionately caring for patients. Alvarez knows that nurses have to be acutely aware of where their "gas tank" of emotional energy hovers and have a conscious awareness of the dynamics of caring. Mimi's desire to teach this class comes from her own experience.

"When I was a baby nurse in oncology, no one told me that I would be coming home and be having dreams about my patients; that something would remind me of my patient. No one told me any of this would happen. I thought I was losing my mind, that something was wrong with me. I was being human.

"To understand (the patient's) humanity I have to go inside of myself and understand my own humanity. There is no way I can be in a relationship with (the patient) and not be touched. There is no way I can care for another and not be changed. That component of self reflection is what is missing in the training of nurses. We teach nurses to reflect clinically, not psychologically."

In this painting, I have memorialized this 21-year-old college student who relinquished his life to cancer. As his nurse, I was honored with his confidence and was impressed with his courage and resilience. Through him, I learned the art of self-discovery and recovery of hope, and was moved to create this painting in his image.



*I am naked as when I was born.*
*I come before you,*
*revealing my vulnerability.*
*I am human.*
*My body holds my soul and the cancer*
*that takes advantage of what this life*
*had offered me.*
*"It really hurts."*
*"I feel betrayed, how my own body had turned against me."*
*"I want to shout to*
*the world, I have cancer. Why me? I want*
*to hide from it, but it is still growing*
*inside of my body."*
*"I am frightened . . ."*
*I will turn around this fear that engulfs*
*me and my future dreams.*
*I have courage as I look to my destiny.*
*Hold onto me in my sojourn,*
*Hold my hands as tight as you can;*
*I will fight as long as you let me.*

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*Note.* "Memorialized," an oil painting by a healthcare professional from Texas, won the Best Overall Healthcare Professional and Best of Healthcare Professional (Oil) categories in the Lilly Oncology On Canvas 2008 art competition and exhibition. Visit www.LillyOncologyOnCanvas.com for more information.

Alvarez's presentation begins with an overview and the sequelae of compassion fatigue. She uses an article written by Loer and Schwartz (2001) about the training of corporate leaders in four capacities: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Loer posits that rituals must be connected to each capacity to build endurance, stamina, and performance. Alvarez translates this unique concept to nursing and incorporates a handout on how to be mindful and present throughout the day.

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/10.CJON.399-400