

Achieving Happiness in Veterinary Medicine I

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Compassion fatigue can affect anyone in a helping profession. Doctors, nurses, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, firefighters, police officers, counselors and teachers are just some of the ‘helpers’ who are faced with the problem of caring “too much” in the course of their day-to-day work.

Compassion fatigue is a type of secondary traumatic stress disorder. It occurs when caregivers see a person or animal in distress and want to help (compassion). Over time, being exposed to the trauma experienced by their charges results in an inability to cope with the constant stress of trying to help (fatigue). There isn’t a moment when compassion fatigue or burnout occurs. Burnout is often characterized as an end-point to compassion fatigue, but “career burnout” is considered to be a synonym for compassion fatigue. The most important definitions are those of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction (feeling fulfilled by caregiving work). Achieving compassion satisfaction should be the goal of every person in a helping profession.

Caregivers by definition take care of others. However, if there is no break from caregiving at work, at home or during “alone time”, then compassion fatigue may result. While some people have a helping job and have aging parents, ill children or high-maintenance pets at home, others take care of everyone in their lives, regardless of need. This coupled with an inability to say “no” and feelings of guilt when practicing self-care can be devastating. It should be noted that in many cases, this pressure is self-inflicted. We’ve all seen people who insist upon doing everything for their spouse or children when they are perfectly capable of doing it themselves. When the caregiver requires care themselves, they may find others unwilling to help them or they may actually refuse help when it is offered. It is important for sufferers of compassion fatigue to let go of the need to control every aspect of their lives. Delegating responsibility is a crucial skill. Consider that if you run your car 24 hours a day and never change the oil or put gas in the tank – you won’t get very far.

Helpers are expected to show compassion toward their patients, clients and their families. Over time, this can result in a gradual loss of compassion. Like a muscle that fatigues with use, compassion has a limited life span. If rest is allowed, the “muscle” can build back up. If the strain is constant, permanent damage may occur. Once this permanent damage occurs, a new job or a new career may be necessary to restore a helper’s positive attitude and ability to show compassion. Considering the cost of education, training and employing a helper, it is in everyone’s best interest to promote an environment of compassion satisfaction. So many people are unaware that compassion fatigue even exists. It is crucial that we educate everyone in the helping professions so they can identify and alleviate this condition. The “cost of caring” is everybody’s business. Unfortunately, employers and coworkers may react negatively to someone experiencing compassion fatigue. Because the sufferer’s work and behavior may be below expectations, discipline may occur, which worsens the problem.

Those helpers in the veterinary profession experience compassion fatigue in a unique way. We devote ourselves to preserving the life and health of our patients, and sometimes, **we have to kill them**. There is no other profession that requires the caregiver to actively end the life of those they help. There is a significant difference between “pulling the plug” and “pushing the plunger”. We need to recognize that while euthanasia is a gift to our profession, it is a very grave responsibility. We should never take lightly the effect euthanasia has on us mentally and sometimes even physically. This ever-present conflict should be a regular topic of discussion with our colleagues or with a mental health professional.

Veterinary professionals in a shelter are typically the worst affected by compassion fatigue. Again, euthanizing at the request of the family is one thing. Determining the fate of thousands of animals yourself and dealing with the consequences is quite another. The media, the public, volunteers and coworkers are notoriously cruel to shelter personnel responsible for euthanasia. Sometimes even our fellow veterinary professionals forget to have compassion for people in their zeal to protect the animals we all cherish. In general, people do not enter the veterinary profession with the express desire to kill animals. We should remember this and consider that the person who seems to have lost their compassion may be in serious trouble and need help coping with compassion fatigue or burnout. Anyone who hurts people in the name of the animals commits a terrible injustice and has no business in the clinic or shelter environment.

Compassion fatigue is not something most veterinarians, practice managers or supervisors are prepared to handle. Address compassion fatigue with your staff on an educational level. If there is a staff member or colleague who is showing signs of compassion fatigue, discuss it with them gently and refer them to a mental health professional. If you provide health insurance with a group plan, ask your provider for resources to help.

There are numerous symptoms of compassion fatigue. One of the simplest monitoring methods for your team is to look for changes in behavior. Just like in veterinary medicine, knowing what's normal and what isn't is the first step to a diagnosis. Below is a sample of symptoms associated with compassion fatigue.

<u>Mental Changes</u>	<u>Physical Changes</u>	<u>Behavioral Changes</u>
Aggression, Depression, Anxiety	Weight loss or gain	Sleeping too much or too little
Apathy (not caring)	Headaches	Increased/decreased appetite
Crying easily	GI upset/issues	Isolation
Inability to focus	Muscle tightness	Indulging
Forgetfulness	Back or neck pain	Addictive (drug use, gambling)
Irritability (staff/patients/clients)	Jaw pain (clenching or grinding teeth)	Increased alcohol/cigarette use
Paranoia	Exacerbation of existing ailments	Fighting/arguing

Like most ailments, prevention is easier than cure. Make sure you mention compassion fatigue in your employee handbook or at orientation. Discuss compassion fatigue (or better yet, compassion satisfaction!) at your staff meetings. Remember that compassion fatigue can affect an entire clinic (organizational compassion fatigue). If you notice that your staff has had a change for the negative, address it immediately. Think about when someone in your office catches the flu. Suddenly there is a flurry of disinfecting and hand washing. Everyone is warning everyone else that there is a bug going around. Compassion fatigue can also be "catching". Watch for rebelliousness from your staff. General expressions of discontent, impatience with coworkers, clients or patients and a plague of eye-rolling and sighing will clue you in. You can "disinfect" by bringing up the problem in a non-threatening way with an attitude of wanting to help. "I've noticed that the entire staff seems down lately. Has something happened that I need to know about?". If the answer isn't something very specific, guide your

team to look for the positive. Ask them “what was good about today?”. If client behavior is the issue, point out that a few nasty clients can eclipse all of the excellent people who walk in the door. Be prepared that your staff may tell you that the problem is YOU or another supervisor. Don’t get defensive! Really listen to what they have to say. You may find that you are suffering with compassion fatigue and need to get help.

Remedies for compassion fatigue are as varied as the people who suffer from its effects. In general, exercise, a healthy diet, non-animal related hobbies and use of vacation time are an excellent start. Counseling, seeing a medical doctor, acupuncture, massage, chiropractic, meditation, stress relief techniques, yoga or a combination of these may be needed to alleviate symptoms. Sometimes, symptoms will persist despite all treatment and then disappear when a new job allows the caregiver to escape the stress. Discovering that your physical ailments are caused by stress can be stressful. The natural tendency is to assume that you must be weak or broken. On the contrary, your personal strength may have allowed you to tolerate a bad situation for far longer than was healthy.

I find that old saying “Choose a job that you love, and you will never work a day in your life” really annoying. Everyone gets tired of their job. Everyone has highs and lows. What is important is to keep our profession in perspective. I’m very fond of the “work to live instead of living to work” and “the dying never regret how little time they spent at the office” philosophies. People in the veterinary profession tend to be idealists. It is quite a slap in the face to discover the reality. Accept that there is pain and suffering in our profession. Acknowledge that there is only so much you can do. Dedicate yourself to doing the best you can and remember that to be the best possible caregiver, you must take care of yourself and allow others to take care of you.

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