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Compassion Fatigue: The Cost of Caring

Veterinary medicine is more than a career: It is a *calling* that attracts compassionate individuals who want to help animals stay healthy and to care for those that are ill and injured. The very nature of our profession calls for caring for our clients through their suffering and sorrow, often at our own emotional and physical cost—the "cost of caring," or compassion fatigue.[1]

Compassion fatigue is characterized by a deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a pronounced change in the ability to feel empathy for patients, loved ones, and team members. Marked by increased cynicism at work and a loss of professional enjoyment, it attacks our empathy and compassion for others—likely the very reasons we became veterinary professionals.[2]

The Effect at Work

Compassion fatigue not only affects us personally, it also affects our work. We may become dispirited and cynical, make errors, lose respect for clients and patients, and contribute to a toxic work environment[2] as we find it more difficult to care. The practice also pays a price, because team members' compassion fatigue may lead to increased absenteeism, turnover, and worker's compensation claims; inappropriate behavior with clients; and changes in relationships such as the inability to work well with others, unhealthy competition, lack of flexibility, failure to complete tasks, and spreading rumors and gossip.[3] Compassion fatigue can ultimately cause professionals to drop out of veterinary medicine altogether.

The Effect at Home

Compassion fatigue does not end at work. We take it home, where it also affects our relationships outside of the practice. We may isolate ourselves and feel a decreased interest in intimacy and increased feelings of mistrust, anger, intolerance, and conflict.[1]

Clearly, compassion fatigue affects us on many levels, and it must be fought on many levels.

We must first combat the personal symptoms and make time to take care of ourselves. We must step out of caregiver mode, make ourselves a priority for part of every day, and find or rediscover activities that make us feel good, both at the practice and at home.

Guarding Against Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue originates at work, so our actions there will not only help us as individuals, but also potentially provide relief to the entire team, resulting in a practice that is mentally healthier, more productive, and more profitable. Most importantly, we must acknowledge and recognize the condition, which means we need to talk about it openly with our team members and leaders.

Compassion fatigue and its signs should be discussed at team meetings, and team members can be given regular assessments so that everyone can recognize the problem. Team leaders should inform new members about this emotional possibility upon hire. When a crisis does occur, such as a longtime patient dying, the effect on the team should immediately be recognized and a safe place where members can discuss feelings should be provided. A buddy system that ensures someone is always available to encourage and listen is another important part of any care plan.

Then, we should mindfully map out a transition routine that helps put our work behind us so that we arrive home with a refreshed, positive outlook. Listen to favorite music while driving, stop by a tranquil park for a few moments, or take the dog for a short walk as soon as arriving home—anything that helps the work–home transition.

Stressors & Satisfiers

It is ironic that our work satisfaction is one of our weapons against compassion fatigue. Our love of what we do helps us return to the practice day after day. A compassion satisfaction and fatigue survey published in *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community*[1] listed these top stressors and satisfiers for veterinary technicians; these same stressors and satisfiers are likely to affect all veterinary professionals:

Stressors:

- Difficult or noncompliant clients
- Problems with team members
- Lack of time.

Satisfiers:

- Helping and healing patients
- Working as a team
- Thankful clients.

The top stressors (see **Stressors & Satisfiers**) often do not involve our patients—they are caused by our relationships with our clients and our team. Therefore, if we work as a team, learn to communicate more clearly with team members and clients, minimize conflict, and distribute our work load evenly, we will get more satisfaction from helping and healing our patients, which will lead to more positive relationships with our clients. The entire team will benefit when we minimize compassion fatigue in our profession.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.