



Are You at Risk for *Compassion* FATIGUE?



Compassion fatigue translates to cumulative stress and can cause a variety of symptoms, but we can develop coping strategies.



“All of us who attempt to heal the wounds of others will ourselves be wounded; it is, after all, inherent in the relationship.” — *David Hilfiker, MD*

As veterinary professionals, we work in the only medical field where we see our patients from womb to tomb. Over time, a close bond is created with both clients and patients, allowing us to embrace their joys and sorrows.

Veterinarians are also the only doctors who have the privilege of legally performing euthanasia when they can no longer prevent their patients' suffering. Although we are fortunate to be able to provide euthanasia, it is our most difficult task and may bring heaviness to our souls. As veterinary healthcare team members, we must continue to support the veterinarian, patient, and client through this process.

The Cost of Caring

Compassion fatigue is described as *the cost of caring*. It is also known as *secondary traumatic stress* and *vicarious traumatization*. Whatever its name, compassion fatigue translates to cumulative stress and can cause a variety of symptoms (see **Compassion**

Fatigue Symptoms). Some of the stressors we experience as caregivers are the demands of animal care, the balance of work and home, and those caused by management. We cannot always control the stressors; however, we can make changes in our attitude and our reactions. We can increase our stress tolerance. We can develop coping strategies.

Self-Care is Key

Self-care is the key to both surviving and preventing compassion fatigue. We cannot continually help clients and patients if we do not take care of ourselves. In each of his training sessions, Alan Wolfelt, PhD, founder of the Center for Loss and Life Transition (centerforloss.com), asks participants questions about themselves and invites them to talk about the activities they enjoy when away from work. If you cannot list any such activities, or if you cannot remember when you last did any of these activities, you are not taking care of yourself.



Compassion Fatigue or Burnout?

Some team members are more compassionate than others by nature and some may struggle with burnout rather than compassion fatigue.

Many of the suggestions given here for dealing with compassion fatigue may also be helpful for those struggling with burnout. The team member should first focus on self-care, although it may be necessary to consider taking a sabbatical, working elsewhere, or finding a new profession.

Following is a list of simple self-care activities:

Find a Support Network

- Seek the support of people you care about.
- Speak honestly with those in your support network.
- Spend time every day with people you enjoy.

Compassion Fatigue Symptoms

Compassion fatigue can elicit a wide variety of symptoms.¹ Be aware that it is generally easier to recognize the symptoms in others than in ourselves.

- Absenteeism
- Anxiety, fear, shame
- Change in weight, appetite, eating habits
- Diminished morale, poor self-esteem
- Dread or horror
- Feelings and thoughts of inadequacy
- Flashbacks of thoughts and images
- Frustration, anger, resentment, rage
- Grief, numbness, fear of death
- Inability to let go of work-related issues
- Loss of hope, loss of enjoyment
- Obsessive, compulsive desire to help
- Physical illness, lack of energy, constant fatigue
- Poor work performance, decreased work interest
- Sadness, depression
- Secretive self-medication, addiction
- Sleep disturbance, nightmares
- Withdrawal from social contacts, isolation, avoidance.

Create a Healthy Work Environment


- Promote a healthy sense of humor in the practice.
- Create a safe space at work.
- Take a break/time out/vacation when you need it.

Take Care of Yourself

- Eat a balanced diet.
- Do some physical activity every day.
- Create quiet time for yourself every day.
- Reward yourself with a treat now and then.
- Get adequate rest.

Find Meaning in Your Work

- Define and pursue your life mission.
- Create and work toward your personal goals.
- Reward yourself for accomplishing these goals.

These self-care activities can be incorporated into our daily lives to bring more balance and to cope with stress. 

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



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