

Behavioral Science

Compassion Fatigue in Animal Care

Directions: Read the article below on compassion fatigue and answer the series of thought questions regarding the topic.

Compassion Fatigue in Veterinarian and Animal Welfare Workers by South African Pet Magazine [Adapted]

Mastering the Art of Caregiving is an extremely rewarding career to be in, but what goes on behind the scenes is a very sad hidden secret that not many of us are always aware of. The pressure of finances, workload and perfection take their toll on a job that is already exposed to high levels of emotion on a daily basis.

Specifically due to long work hours, work overload, practice management responsibilities, client expectations and complaints, euthanasia procedures, and poor work-life balance, anxiety and depression are common among veterinarians, as are related personality traits such as perfectionism.

Studies confirm that (animal) care givers play host to high levels of compassion fatigue, a secondary traumatic stress syndrome. Those who care for animals are known to suffer elevated levels of compassion fatigue due to excessive expectations placed on their time, talents and resources.

The list of factors that increase chances of compassion fatigue include:

- high levels of responsibility, especially for business owners such as veterinarians and animal welfare workers;
- no room for mistakes;
- unsuccessful outcomes leading to poor public opinion;
- long hours;
- high client demands;
- chronic emotional trauma on the job, and
- severity of the workload.

Leading traumatologist J. Eric Gentry, PhD, suggests people attracted to animal care often enter the field already compassion fatigued. A strong identification with the helpless, voiceless animal is often the motivator. It is a common behavior for those of us who hail from a tradition of “other-directedness.” Simply put, we were taught at an early age to care for the needs of others before caring for our own needs. This, combined with unresolved life traumas, can lead us to experience this secondary traumatic stress.

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When an animal welfare worker or caregiver focuses on others, both animal and human, without practicing self-care daily, destructive behaviors associated with compassion fatigue can surface.

Symptoms include:

- apathy;
- bottled up emotions;
- substance abuse;
- lack of personal hygiene practices;
- emotional outbursts;
- persistent physical ailments, sadness;
- flashbacks of traumatic events and recurring nightmares.

Our overworked, stressed bodies are sending us a signal that self-care and healing are required.

Healing begins by employing such simple practices as: regular exercise; healthy eating habits; enjoyable social outings, building a strong support system; practicing some form of spirituality; and restful sleep.

It is important to note that in any animal welfare organization when most of the staff and volunteers exhibit high levels of compassion fatigue, organizational compassion fatigue can set in. Symptoms include:

- chronic absenteeism,
- rising workers' compensation costs,
- high turnover rates,
- friction among employees,
- and a Them vs Us mentality between staff and management.

Eventually, the bottom line is affected; profits drop as well as employee productivity.

Fortunately, there are ways for leadership to help staff lower their compassion fatigue levels.

Education is first and foremost. Compassion fatigue trainings can help staff learn how to recognize and manage the symptoms. Other ways to improve the caregiving environment includes:

- Create a space for animal caregiver meditation or silence.
- Debrief as a group after a traumatic event.
- Allow staff to have input to improve the working environment.
- Create a memorial garden or shrine to the animals who have died in your care.
- Take a lunch break and brief breaks throughout the workday.

While the effects of compassion fatigue are dismal, chances for recovery is not. Compassion fatigue is a term, not a disease. The associated symptoms are normal displays of chronic stress resulting from the caregiving work animal caregivers perform day in, day out.



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Hopefully, by practicing authentic, sustainable self-care, all those who care so passionately about animals will begin the healing process and experience the benefits - body, mind and soul.

As caregivers, we are often stressed and don't know why. Without realizing the effects that life circumstances have on us, we tend to sweep our feelings of frustration, sadness, and turmoil under the rug.

Stress surveys can show you the kind of life pressure that you are facing. Depending on your coping skills or the lack thereof, these sort of tests can predict the likelihood that you will fall victim to a stress related illness. The illness could be mild - frequent tension headaches, acid indigestion, and/or loss of sleep to very serious illness like ulcers, cancer, migraines and the like.

Thought Questions:

1. Summarize why animal care givers are so susceptible to compassion fatigue.

2. Analyze the methods that employers can use to combat compassion fatigue and why it is in their best interest to have their employee's mental health in mind.

3. Expand the ideas from this article and explain the similarities and differences in how you perceive compassion fatigue could be an issue in conservation work as well.