The True Cost of Caring: Managing Compassion Fatigue

By Jeff Grognet, DVM

Our role, working with animals that have positive and negative outcomes, puts us at risk for compassion fatigue (CF). This concept first arose in the nursing field; a case study in the UK showed that the veterinary suicide rate is four times that of the general population and twice that of other health professionals. Staff at veterinary hospitals, as well as workers and volunteers at shelter and rescue organizations, are just as susceptible to the effects of CF.

CF is emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical exhaustion. It is triggered by a caregiver's desire to alleviate suffering. In the early stages, it is not necessarily a problem because it can be helpful to propel us into action. However, as it gets more intense, it becomes a threat to your personal and professional life.

CF is often mistaken as burnout. CF can be a contributor to burnout, but the two conditions are uniquely different and each has a different path to recovery.

CF is always tied to dispensing care to animals. Burnout, on the other hand, results from work-related stress, triggered by excessive, prolonged stress derived from organizational concerns, policies, and bureaucracy. Burnout can be treated by changing jobs. CF can't.

CF can cause a wide range of physical and psychiatric disorders. Many people turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with depression and anxiousness. Also, disturbingly, many team members have suffered from past abuse. They initially looked to animals for comfort and this purpose is not met if the person is stressed by CF.

CF compromises our ability to empathize, engage, and care. This can end in a reduction in the care of the animals. Job performance plummets, and the person finds no fulfillment at work.

Indicators of Compassion Fatigue

These are all symptoms you may notice in someone who has CF or is developing it.

- Dissatisfaction at work: Less enjoyment, dread of certain situations, losing sense of purpose, not wanting to work with certain coworkers.
- Work-life imbalance: Don't partake in outside activities, complaining to others, being angry or blaming, and isolation.
- Poor health: Sweating, aches and pains, headaches, difficulty sleeping, stomach upset, rapid heartbeat and breathing difficulty.
- Spiritual discord: Loss of faith, scepticism, losing life's meaning, feelings of hopelessness.
- Emotional outbreaks: Powerlessness, depression, anxiety, fear, feeling depleted, bad dreams, and being hypersensitive or insensitive to emotion-provoking situations.
- Signs of poor behavior: Irritability, moody, poor sleep, substance abuse, prone to accidents, losing things, too much vigilance over coworkers.
Everyone has things that bother them. However, if you are suffering from CF, rather than just annoyance, your reaction is extreme to certain triggers. If you react excessively to certain things, you may be suffering from CF. It could be a client unwilling to treat an animal, euthanasia, seeing animals being treated poorly, or issues with coworkers.

People go through recognizable steps as CF progresses. If we can recognize them before a crisis occurs and intervene, we can prevent the end result. These are:

1. Job dissatisfaction
2. Poor interactions with coworkers
3. A poor attitude developing toward work
4. Suffering from anxiety and depression
5. Having sleep disturbances
6. Disturbed by traumatic memories
7. Developing physical ailments
8. Becoming irritable
9. Personal relationships suffering

If we don't address CF, it debilitates the people and the hospital. Work quality may suffer. Relations between coworkers can become stressed. Morale deteriorates. This can lead to high employee turnover.

Self-care for Compassion Fatigue

This begins by finding ways to recharge and protect ourselves so that it does not lead to compassion fatigue. This means balancing the demands of the workplace with our needs.

If there are situations that stress you, is there someone you can talk to that can appreciate your emotions and be supportive? Are you getting enough sleep to recharge your body? Do you eat right? Exercise and movement helps the body realign and feel better. This does not have to be strenuous, just regular. Can you take time for yourself, such as yoga or meditation?

Establish and maintain boundaries and limitations on availability and involvement. Don't let one area of your life overpower your identity. If you don't take time to care for yourself, you won't have anything to give in the future. Devote time and energy for the most important person you know - YOU.

Managing Compassion Fatigue

If we recognize the signs of CF in ourselves or others, it's time to act. What triggers can we reduce? Would education (of workers and clients) help? If it's a coworker, would more training help, or is it a personality issue? Can you change your attitude and create a better relationship?

We need to review how many things went well rather than overemphasize the things that did not go as well. Go home with your thoughts on the good things.

Work on yourself. Eat right, get your sleep, and exercise. Do hobbies and things that are totally unrelated to work. Spend time with other people, but also spend time alone. Put some energy into emotionally nourishing activities every day.
If these steps are not enough, then it's time to seek professional help. More people than you'd think have looked for help for this condition.

**Things the Team Can Do**

Create a feel-good file. Have a file folder with some notes describing a case where you've had a positive impact in an animal's life. It doesn't have to be much, but the idea is that if you are feeling that you aren't helping much, pull out a story and read it.

If there is a case that is particularly stressful to the staff and volunteers, discuss the case so that everyone knows what went on and try looking at it from a positive aspect by trying to establishing ways of preventing what goes on in the future. This keeps all the staff in the loop and there is no inaccurate discussion about it.

If you have a work situation that is causing grief, see if you can find someone that you can discuss it with. This person must be willing to keep the conversation confidential, but by discussing it this way you can air your concerns and hopefully come up with a solution or a plan of action.

Praise other team members for good work, every day. Be aware when someone is not doing well and express concern. Sometimes all they need is someone else to alert them to a problem for them to recognize it in themselves. Focus on the good that everyone in the organization does.