The Cost of Caring – Compassion Fatigue
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INTRODUCTION – WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Those that work with animals are “caring” individuals. It is likely that the
characteristic of caring increases the risk as a professional to the condition
of compassion fatigue. Professionals who work with people or animal, particularly
those who are suffering, must not only cope with the normal stress or
dissatisfaction of work but also with their personal feelings and emotional
response to that suffering. Compassion fatigue or the “cost of caring” (Figley, 1985)
is common amongst non-human-animal care professional (NACP) staff. It has been
linked not just to the impact of euthanasia, but also by other common occupational
stressors such as pet/animal loss and death, chronic illnesses and end of life care.
Compassion fatigue should not be confused with “burnout” but appears to feel the
same. Compassion fatigue (Figley, 1985) is “a condition that is a result of a
depletion of our internal emotional resources”. This depletion occurs when carers
provide care to clients who are experiencing an emotional situation. When a staff
member is exposed to one or many of these critical incidents, compassion fatigue
is experienced” (Mittchener & Ogilvie, 2002, p. 308).

Burnout: A prolonged response to chronic physical or
emotional stressors resulting in exhaustion and ineffectiveness (Maslach et al., 2001)
Compassion Fatigue: A severe malaise as a result of caring for patients
who are in pain or suffering (Sabo, 2006)
Moral Distress: Encountered when a person knowing the ethically
appropriate course is unable to act on it (Elpenn et al., 2005)
Secondary Traumatic Disorder: Encountered by those who care for people who are
directly experiencing a traumatic experience; also
may be referred to as vicarious trauma, indicating
Secondary distress imposed by witnessing trauma (Figley, 1995)

IMPACTS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE

Hyper-vigilance over patients and co-workers
Lowered tolerance for frustration
Incapable of mindfulness
Questioning life’s meaning, pervasive hopelessness, loss of purpose
Sweating, rapid heartbeat, breathing difficulty, aches and pains
Literally can’t think outside the box
Stress = stereotypical thinking
Person becomes hard to work with

Compassion fatigue can impact many areas of a person’s life.

CONCLUSION

Self Care Strategies to Mitigate Burnout and Compassion Fatigue and Promote Wellbeing

• Regularly appraise and regulate six areas of work life: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values.
• Create a network of peers and co-workers and stay connected with them on an on-going basis.
• Avoid depersonalisation such as distancing from work both emotionally and cognitively.
• Balance empathy and compassion with objectivity, utilising formalised structures, policies, and procedures to provide guidance.
• Strive to have increased self-awareness, share feelings and responsibilities, set limits to avoid overload of work.
• Adopt healthy lifestyle and self care activities that are meaningful to you including mindfulness and meditation, exercise & vacations.
• Practice meaning-based coping by sharing personal and professional sources of meaning and incorporating into daily practice.
• Prioritise personal relationships such as family and close friends.

References: