



Practice Building Tips

Compassion Fatigue

As a veterinary professional, you have one of the most rewarding jobs in the world. You play a direct role in improving animals' health and wellbeing, and you're able to experience gratitude from pet parents knowing you've made a difference in their pet's quality of life. You're constantly expanding your knowledge, you work alongside a team who shares your passion, and you may even be your own boss.

Working in an veterinary hospital may sound like an animal lover's dream job, but nothing could have prepared you for the emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion that can come from the consequences of working in the caregiving profession. The wonderful personality traits that describe you - passionate, loving, sensitive, dedicated, full of empathy – may be the same traits that make you more vulnerable to compassion fatigue.

Often quoted as the inventor of the term compassion fatigue, Charles Figley, PhD describes it as, "... a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress. It is a state of extreme tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper."

You put your heart and soul into caring for animals every day. Sadly, that means you're no stranger to the dark side of your job: cases of animal cruelty, the loss of long-term patients, delivering bad news to a client, and guiding grieving pet owners through heartbreak after saying final goodbyes. You may also be putting in long hours, skipping meals, staying up late researching, getting up early to answer emails, and sacrificing time with your own pets and family. These feelings of exhaustion are known as burnout, most often the result of an unsup-



portive work environment rather than the repeated exposure to trauma associated with compassion fatigue. However, both conditions often go hand-in-hand.

Left ignored, compassion fatigue can affect not only work performance and the health of the practice; it can affect personal relationships and quality of life. It can result in feelings of sadness, guilt and isolation, putting those in the veterinary profession at an increased risk of suicide. Compassion fatigue is a serious problem in this industry, and we need to do our best to recognize the signs of a problem and provide emotional support for those who need it.

It starts by understanding the ABCs of Prevention: Awareness, Balance, and Connections.

Awareness: Do you or does someone you know have symptoms of compassion fatigue? Early recognition is key to getting back on a healthy path.

- Difficulty concentrating

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- Isolation/ withdrawal
- Not feeling joy in activities that were once pleasurable
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased anxiety
- Change in weight or appetite
- Poor self-care/hygiene
- Compulsive behaviors such as gambling, overspending or overeating

Balance: It's easy to be swept up in the hustle and bustle of a busy practice, but self-care is critical as a means for creating wellness and building resilience against stress. Make time for the things that make you happy outside the walls of your practice.

- Is there a hobby you've always wanted to pursue but never made time for? Participating in new activities creates new neural pathways in the brain – important for mental health.
- What helps you feel more relaxed?
- Allow yourself a mini-escape.
- Pursue medical treatment or professional counseling if symptoms interfere with daily functioning.
- Practice 15-20 minutes a day of expressive writing. Journal about the things that caused you stress, list the things you feel grateful for, what brought you joy, and what made you laugh.
- Find quiet time in a calm place to restore balance for your soul.
- Practice meditation or yoga.

Connections: Building a positive support system is one of the best things you can do to alleviate compassion fatigue. Look for people in your personal and professional circles who you can turn to when you need to vent about challenging situations. Encourage staff to discuss their feelings, offer training that educates employees about compassion fatigue, and encourage a healthy work-balance. Creating an open environment in which employees can feel heard, validated and supported can be instrumental when navigating traumatic experiences.

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue, you may find some of these resources helpful:

www.compassionfatigue.org
<http://1lifecc.com/>
<http://self-compassion.org/>
<https://www.mindtools.com/>
<https://www.avma.org/>
<https://www.massvet.org/page/MentalHealth>