

Compassion fatigue

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Abstract

The care of animals in our charge is paramount not only from an animal welfare point of view but also from the quality of research obtained. Those that care about animals make ideal animal carers but they are also those most at risk. Compassion fatigue can be a symptom of this caring and of exposure to euthanasia.

Compassion fatigue is a well recognised condition, or state of being, associated with the caring of people or animals that are traumatised or perceived to be suffering. Carla Joinson (1992) is credited for introducing the term compassion fatigue into literature, describing it as the unique stressors that affect people in caring professions (e.g., nurses, psychotherapists, ministers). These stressors impact most often on those carers that care the most – those that go the extra mile to ensure the constant well-being of the animals in their care.

Compassion fatigue is often referred to as an expanded form of burn-out and can leave the carer feeling:

- depressed;
- anxious;
- exhausted;
- angry;
- ineffective; and
- detached.

Whilst well recognised in animal shelter workers, up until recently it had not been considered to be of concern to either animal carers or their employers. When speaking at a recent symposium for animal technicians, the author noted the number of comments from laboratory animal carers in regards to their feelings and perceived work-related stress, many recognising and experiencing the symptoms referred to above.

These feelings develop over time, escalating gradually, and such feelings were often not dealt with until they had significantly impacted on the carer. At such a time many often chose to leave their employment rather than deal with their symptoms. This is an important point to remember when helping staff cope with such feelings in the workplace. Often, these feelings are unexpected because they have been doing the same job for some time with no perceived issues. One day however, they find they can no longer do what has been asked of them in the past, even very recently.

Carers suffering from compassion fatigue may be irritable and suffer from mood swings because they are dealing with an emotional roller coaster of feelings. Other symptoms such as sleep loss can lead to poor work performance. Exhaustion makes it difficult to have a normal life outside of work. An important coping strategy is to strive for a healthy balance in life.

The constant care, repetitive manipulations and concern for the welfare of animals in their care can lead a carer to be in a constant state of anxiety. Forgetting to check water and food levels, ensuring there is clean bedding, and administering correct drug dosages are real concerns that have huge implication if not actioned in a timely and appropriate way.

Heavy and prolonged workloads, working in isolation and lack of support and training are a few of the contributing factors identified as leading to cumulative stress. In comparison, in a position such as that of a supermarket attendant for example, one would expect that there would be little concern over the failure to check that the shelves were filled at the end of each day. Whilst the manager may not be too happy it has no implications for the wellbeing of the shelves.

A common coping mechanism seen in compassion fatigue is emotional blunting. This is perceived by colleagues as hardness or on-the-job toughness. In reality, it is used to block how one feels to a given situation or situations. Emotional blunting can be seen in animal shelters where euthanasia is a large requirement of the job.

Recognising symptoms and staying in touch with your feelings is an important part of caring for oneself. This was suggested as one of a three-pronged approach to managing occupational stress (Huggard & Huggard 2008). The first component is the organisation's responsibility to care for staff. Ensuring a safe work environment, manageable workloads, making staff aware of any risks associated with their work, and rotating staff in areas recognised as stressful are but a few of the employer's responsibilities. The second component is the importance of a sense of community amongst one's peers to maintain awareness of and support of colleagues.

Finally the third component is prevention as produced by the individual. Consider altering your expectations of yourself and others, so they are achievable. Exercise and nutrition are often overlooked

in high-stress workers but is proven to reduce stress. Practising good emotional health maintenance and ensuring a healthy balance of work and home life will enable you to manage and relieve stress quickly. Staying balanced, focused and in control no matter what challenges you face is key to managing stress. These proactive steps and learning to recognise compassion fatigue symptoms in ourselves and our co-workers, and diligently educating ourselves about compassion fatigue, will ensure we stay healthy and effective in our work with animals.

Basically, learn to take care of yourself, recognise when you need help and ask for it, reflect on successes, keep things in perspective, and lastly be kind to yourself.

References and further reading

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