COMPASSION FATIGUE
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The Cost of Caring: Compassion Fatigue
Providing care from both the heart and science requires the ability to express empathy. However, the empathetic response can lead to compassion fatigue. When we find ourselves giving without adequately replenishing ourselves, it is only a matter of time before we experience a shortage of compassion and a sense of fatigue. Simply put, compassion fatigue occurs when we have depleted our emotional resources as we care for others.

Compassion fatigue is not a reflection of our character, professionalism, or skill level but is directly related to our willingness to be emotionally engaged with another being that is hurting. Compassion fatigue has or will strike every member of a caring health care team. The phenomenon is not limited to veterinary professionals but occurs in physicians, nurses, firemen, combat medics, and the like.

Compassion fatigue is the reason many caring, compassionate veterinarians, nurses, receptionists, and other caregivers leave the profession. The desire to leave the veterinary profession can strike at any age but seems to occur most often when a person is at the height of his or her professional career as a caregiver. Awareness and understanding of this condition are essential in its prevention and treatment and in maintaining the health of the team.

Compassion Fatigue versus Burnout
Compassion fatigue is perhaps the greatest threat to the health and happiness of any member of the veterinary health care team. Although compassion fatigue is considered to be a form of burnout and has many of the same clinical signs, the two conditions are unique. The conditions must be distinguished because they have different causes and paths to recovery.

Compassion fatigue is not predictable; it results when one’s internal emotional resources are depleted. Sometimes a member of the veterinary health care team provides so much care and compassion to clients who are experiencing an emotional moment, such as when a diagnosis of cancer is being discussed, that they find themselves depleted. Compassion fatigue is triggered by one or more emotionally charged events (called critical incidents) at a time when one’s emotional resources are exhausted. Members of the veterinary health care team often experience critical incidents when other people become emotionally distressed.

Extreme examples are the experiences of those who identified or provided care to people or animals killed or injured in the September 11 World Trade Center disaster or to the search-and-rescue dogs involved in the recovery efforts; more commonplace examples include performing and experiencing euthanasia, helping an owner through the loss of a pet, informing a caregiver that his or her pet has cancer, providing terminal patient care, and discussing the financial affordability of care. Each member of the veterinary health care team must be considered unique, and the way each person deals with critical incidents differs, often based on his or her individual experiences, beliefs, and values. In addition, compassion fatigue may intensify the emotional and physical symptoms in team members who are already experiencing burnout, and burnout can likewise intensify compassion fatigue.

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Compassion fatigue is perhaps the greatest threat to the health and happiness of any member of the veterinary health care team.
The following feelings or thoughts are sometimes associated with compassion fatigue:1–8

• Avoidance of thoughts, feelings, activities, or situations that remind one of a frightening experience.
• Feeling estranged from other members of the veterinary health care team or feeling that there is no one to talk to.
• Difficulty falling or staying asleep, especially when loss of sleep is related to memories or experiences being played over and over in one’s mind.
• Outbursts of anger or irritability with little provocation.
• Needing to “work through” a traumatic experience associated with a patient or client to get over the event.
• Being preoccupied with a previous critical incident or with specific patients or their caregivers.
• Loss of concern about the well-being of coworkers, patients, and caregivers.
• Feeling trapped, hopeless, edgy, weak, tired, rundown, or depressed.
• Desire to avoid certain patients and their caregivers.
• Feeling disliked by clients and their families.
• Inability to separate work and personal life.

• Feeling like one works more for the money than for personal fulfillment.
• Feelings of failure.

Burnout is predictable and very common. It is not necessarily associated with the exhaustion of emotion or empathy but rather is a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Two major causes of burnout are bureaucratic atmospheres and overwork. Burnout is not associated with the aforementioned critical incidents, but it is predictably associated with the stress of overwork, repetition, or the bureaucracy of seemingly less-important tasks, such as paying bills, reviewing reports, and endless paperwork without apparent value or worth.

Prevention and Therapy

So how do people provide compassionate care, meet the medical and nonmedical needs of patients and caregivers, and stay true to what brought them to a caring profession without experiencing fatiguing and potentially devastating consequences? First, we must acknowledge that as a profession—by the very nature of what we do and who we are—we are at risk for compassion fatigue. Simply by acknowledging the condition and accepting that we are vulnerable, we can see the potential hazards, recognize likely inciting situations, and hopefully prevent devastating outcomes. We also must work with all staff members to experience and then celebrate the sense of achievement in the work in which we are involved. On a daily basis, veterinary health care teams intervene in the lives of clients and their pets to provide high-quality medical, surgical, and preventive care while offering emotional support and validating the bond that brought those pets and people to our offices. This is compassionate care; to accomplish it well requires a great deal of emotional energy from every team member. In this manner, we provide for the needs of our patients and caregivers. The act of caring is the epitome of success in our profession, regardless of the emotional nature of the situation or the medical outcome. Although compassion fatigue cannot be completely avoided, there are many strategies to help team members mitigate its impact (see box).

Conclusion

When we employ compassion in caring for our patients, we must do so by expressing empathy, yet the act of empathizing with our clients can lead to compassion fatigue. When any member of the veterinary health care team finds him- or herself giving without allowing him- or herself to be replenished emotionally, it is only a matter of time before there will be a shortage of compassion. Simply put, compassion fatigue results when there is a depletion of internal emotional resources as we care and provide compassion for others. This depletion is not a reflection of the
character, professionalism, or skill level of the team member. Rather, one’s strength and willingness to be emotionally engaged with another being is affected. All members of the veterinary health care team joined the profession to provide care, which comes from both their minds (through medical and surgical skills) and their hearts (by supporting and providing for the emotional needs of caregivers). The success of veterinary care stems from providing this level of compassionate care and supporting the individuals who provide it. By appreciating the reality of compassion fatigue and providing mechanisms to mitigate its effects, a practice can thrive by providing the finest in compassionate care.

REFERENCES