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When Helping Hurts

Compassion Fatigue in the Veterinary Profession

Kathleen Ayl, PsyD
I thank all of my children, two and four legged, for continually inspiring me to do my best, and my brother, Michael, for his undying support. I am grateful for all of my wonderful teachers, the ascended masters, and all of the beautiful souls with whom I have had the privilege of walking this life path. I am thankful for my brother/friend, Mukund, with whom I have walked many paths, many times, and for my forever friend, Melanie.
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Suffering demands action from those who witness it. It is an overwhelming voice that can drown out all other voices with its anguished wail. The anguished wail of those that have no voice—our animals, our pets—burn into the hearts and souls of those who are on the front line of veterinary care. The suffering of animals and humans is irrevocably tied by the visceral response that it raises in those who choose to bear witness and to take action.

People who work in the veterinary industry have both the joy and the pain of the human–animal interaction. Their work is not just about taking care of animals; it also is about taking care of the people who are bonded with the animals they provide treatment for. From the excitement of the first puppy to ushering out of this world the oldest and most-loved animal, veterinary personnel are fully invested members of the journey.

In the summer of 2012 my house, along with 65 others in our area, was burned in one of the wildfires in the Rocky Mountains. Besides the personal loss, I experienced firsthand the effect of such devastation on a whole community, including its animals. The fire started in our mixed farming and residential valley when most people were at work in town. Many animals were trapped with the fire bearing down on them.
Sadly, some were lost. Most were saved. Some have been found months after the fire. All reside in the hearts of the people who loved them and provided veterinary care for them.

Without the support of the community, including veterinary hospitals and personnel, few of the animals would have found their way back to their people. During the hasty evacuation, people quickly stopped at houses picking up all the animals they could find. Many of the small animals ended up at the local veterinary hospitals. Our local county fairgrounds opened the animal facility and people were invited to bring their stock or any that they had herded up that might not be theirs. While terribly serious, this touched our hearts and brought a few smiles in a sad time. I have this vision of someone driving up with a cow in the back of their station wagon saying they just found it wandering around. In reality, the cows and the horses and other stock were terrified, as were their people. In the days following the fire the veterinary offices were crucial in reuniting these animals with their people. This experience brought home for me the power of the human–animal bond, both among pet owners and veterinary professionals.

Even without the great drama of a wildfire, caring for animals is hard work. Caring for their people is hard work. Sometimes you have to work with people whose hearts are breaking because of the seriousness of their pet's illness. Sometimes you must care for animals that have been hurt by their people. Sometimes you have to protect those animals and be their voice despite the ire and anger of their owners. In situations such as these, the work is hard and it may also be frightening.

Working in a typical veterinary hospital brings joys and sorrows. While the joys are what sustain you to do the work, the sorrows can threaten your ability. Being with other staff who are deeply affected by the sorrows can be painful for all of the personnel. When personnel are able to work together to address the sorrows and sustain the joy of their work, everyone benefits.

This groundbreaking book helps people in the veterinary profession understand how their work can affect them as people, and as individuals who care. Identifying, responding to, and preventing compassion fatigue and other negative effects of caring can promote professional quality of life. “Compassion fatigue” can transform into “compassion satisfaction.” Those who are able to feel
more competent and confident in their work provide better care. They won’t leave their job because of the trauma and sadness they may experience. A veterinary hospital that recognizes the pain that can arise from doing the work while also recognizing the joy of the work is a truly unique environment; it is a more positive environment for employees, animals, and their people. That positive environment can in turn strengthen the capacity and boost business, helping to provide badly needed care.

This book offers clear, practical advice on how to improve positive aspects of the work that veterinary professionals do and the compassion satisfaction, and how to ameliorate the negative. It provides specific and easy-to-apply methods to address, reduce, or prevent the negative aspects. It can lead practices in developing the kind of environments where the team can provide the best possible care to the animals and the people with whom they work.

Caring for animals and their people is amazing work. Caring about how those do this amazing work is the greatest caring of all.

Beth Hudnall Stamm, PhD
Director, ProQOL.org
Associate Animal Behavior Consultant
International Association of Animal Behavior Consulting
Preface

All you ever wanted to do was help. You lived it, you breathed it, and you have helped so many, and yet there you are, questioning whether you did enough, beating yourself up, because no matter what you did, you just couldn’t save that one pet, or things didn’t go as planned. The same work that used to bring you such joy and fulfillment now brings you feelings of darkness and despair. Or, perhaps you are fine, but you see these feelings developing in a coworker or even an employee—and you want to help, but aren’t sure how. You’ve heard of compassion fatigue, but never gave it much thought. Could this be the problem, and if so, what is the solution?

So what is compassion fatigue? In this book, you will find a thorough definition, and you will learn how to distinguish compassion fatigue from other related terms, such as burnout and grief. These explanations, accompanied by examples and case studies, will help you identify the causes and recognize the symptoms of compassion fatigue. You will learn what you can do to prevent it, and you will learn how to get your life back on track if you already have it—or how to advise that coworker or employee who has begun to struggle with this all-too-common experience among veterinary caregivers from veterinarians to front-office staff.
Even the best in the field struggle with compassion fatigue. It in fact often arises from the very qualities that allow caring individuals to be effective veterinary team members to begin with: the ability to empathize and have compassion for those who are suffering. Compassion fatigue is a common result when losses come too close together or there has just been too much loss, or when team members feel unsupported by management and find themselves with nowhere to turn.

The work that you do, over time, little by little, can steal your spiritual, emotional, financial, and physical resources until it feels as though there is nothing left to give. Veterinary caregivers who experience this kind of fatigue are not alone, nor are they “going crazy.” There is hope, not only for recovery, but for learning how to prevent a recurrence. Fortunately, compassion fatigue is something that can be reversed as long as it is identified properly and dealt with appropriately.

Life is all about balance. Maintaining balance is rarely a once-and-for-all deal; it’s more like walking a tightrope, where you must continually balance yourself to avoid falling and move forward. There are times in all of our lives when balance seems to come naturally, but there are also times when finding the right balance becomes an enormous struggle. Helping veterinary caregivers find or regain that balance is a major goal of this book.

At one point in my life I had the distinct privilege of volunteering my time at an orphanage in India. There, Mother Teresa would instruct us to “love until it hurts.” I often think of those words today because I see veterinary caregivers carry out this mantra daily. Many times, it is something they do so routinely that they seem to do it without even trying. And yet, if I could be so bold as to add my own words to those of a saint, I would say “love until it hurts, but make sure that you take care of yourself in the process, so that you can continue to be there for those who will need you the most.”

Mother Teresa herself never wanted to lose her connection with the poorest of the poor. Consequently, she would refuse, even in her older years, to sleep on anything other than the thin bamboo mat that she would roll out on the hard concrete floor of the Mother House in Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta). She took on the pain of the poor and dying, and she never wanted to lose touch with that. But when the intensity of the pain is unending and the number of
losses insurmountable, even living saints must take precautions so that they
don’t become numb to the suffering of others. We must take care of ourselves to
continue to be there for others. We must find our balance.

This book is designed to be used in two ways. If you are an individual who
wishes to learn about compassion fatigue, you can, by all means, read it straight
through on your own. But it can also be used as a training tool by veterinary
team members who would like to study it together. Much can be learned from
discussing the issues and sharing experiences. Therefore, you will find “For the
Trainer” sections at the end of each chapter. These are designed to guide you
through group study sessions. If you are reading the book by yourself, read
through these sections and think about them; perhaps you can journal your
responses. If you are meeting as a group, discuss your answers aloud on a vol-
untary basis.

Finally, the people mentioned in the stories that follow are amalgamations
of many of the clients and veterinary professionals with whom I have had the
privilege of working. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.
A must-read. This book offers a roadmap through the maze of companion-animal care, from its pitfalls to its joys. While defining compassion fatigue and the suffering that can stem from doing this highly emotional work, Dr. Ayl reminds us of the pleasure and satisfaction we can derive from caring for our dear, furry friends.

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