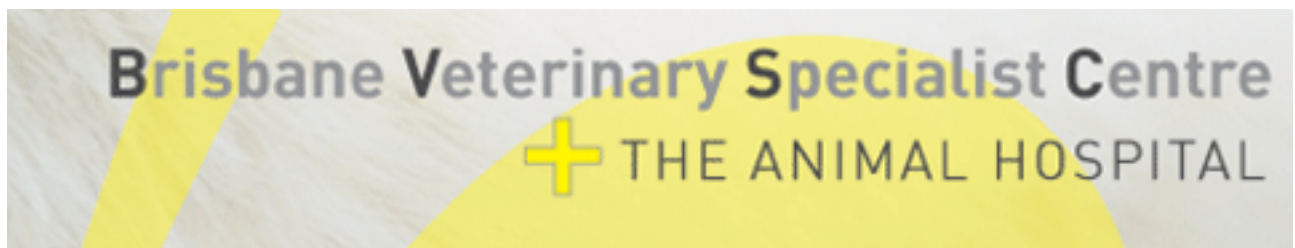




# Work Life Integration and Compassion Fatigue Workshop



Further Resources: [www.HighPerformanceVets.com/BVSC](http://www.HighPerformanceVets.com/BVSC)

8th December 2015

Dr Natasha Wilks  
BVSc DipCoaching



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# About Dr Natasha Wilks & High Performance Vets

Natasha Wilks BVSc DipCoaching CertSEIP, is a Life and Executive Coach who works with professionals helping them accelerate their career success and increase their wellbeing.

Natasha Wilks is a veterinarian with over 15 years experience in large and small animal practice working in Australia and the UK.

Natasha graduated from the University of Queensland in 1999 and started work in central Queensland in a very busy small animal practice. She then moved to the Gold Coast and in 2004 she headed to the UK to work for a group of very busy practices for 2 years, where she gained a tremendous amount of experience.

In 2006, Natasha returned to Australia and spent time in an Equine practice before leaving to start her coach training and coaching practice, Vibrant Life Coaching.

Natasha completed her Life & Executive Coaching Diploma in 2007 and worked with various people from business owners, mothers and executives.

High Performance Vets was created in 2011 when Natasha returned to veterinary practice after taking time off to raise her young family. She recognised the issues that veterinarians were struggling with could be overcome with the knowledge she gained in her coach training.

Since then Natasha has been working with veterinarians to help them succeed in their career by creating career plans, identify their strengths, learning to understand and communicate with clients and improve their wellbeing.

Natasha is passionate about increasing the Social & Emotional Intelligence of veterinarians and improving their wellbeing by implementing positive psychology principles, improving self awareness and reduction and management of stress in practice.

Natasha completed a Certificate in Social + Emotional Intelligence Coaching in 2014.

Natasha has been a presenter at the AVAPM conference in 2013, 2014 & 2015, the Pan Pacific Veterinary Conference in 2015 and the Brisbane Veterinary Practitioners Conference in 2015. Natasha has also run workshops and training in house in various practices in Australia.

She has written articles for the February and March 2015 editions of the AVJ, AVBA In The Black Magazine and VetAnswers Fat D, Dental Purple Paper, in both 2013, 2014 and 2015.

Natasha is a contributing author for the VetCoach Australasian book to be released in early 2016.

She has presented webinars for The Webinar Vet Australia and Veterinary Classrooms since 2012.

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# Integrating Your Life & Career

Previously, work-life balance was the goal individuals were trying to achieve. However, it seemed to create more distress when work and life started to blend into each other.

What you should be looking to create is work life integration. How can your professional and personal life exist in harmony? You need to determine which areas are important to you and how they can integrate leading to fulfilment in the various areas.

***For more information:** Read Stewart D Friedman's book, *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life*, 2014.*

## Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life represents a bird's eye view of the various areas of your life. It helps to identify the areas that contribute to your fulfilment and happiness. It can also help you see which areas that you are less satisfied with, which may be contributing to frustration and unhappiness.

Consider the following areas in your life and the level of satisfaction currently.

**Career:** Is your career where you want it to be by now? Are you heading in the right direction?

**Family & Friends:** Are your family & friends supportive of you? Are you supportive of your family? Are you engaging friends and socialising to your satisfaction levels?

**Significant Other/Romance:** Do you feel loved? How often are you expressing love to others?

**Recreation & Fun:** Are you enjoying your life and making it fun? Are you satisfied with the level of activity that you do?

**Health & Fitness:** How physically healthy are you? Are you satisfied with your level of fitness? Are you satisfied with your diet?

**Finance & Wealth:** Are you earning enough income to satisfy your current needs? Are you financial setup for future growth in wealth?

**Personal Growth:** How focused are you on personal growth? Are you satisfied with your direction? Are you trying new experiences and seeking to learn?

**Physical Environment:** Does your physical environment support you and contribute to your wellbeing?

# Your Why.. Your Meaning & Purpose

## Why you do what you do

Knowing your meaning or purpose allows you to recognise why you make the choices you do and what motivates you in your career.

Being aware of your purpose and meaning contributes to your wellbeing and fulfilment, personally and professionally.

Meaning is referred to by Tom Rath as any small act you do every day that improves the life of another person. Martin Seligman defines it as belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.

Use your meaning to recognise your value and re-energise your work. It can also protect you against stress as you are aware of the bigger picture of your contributions.

***To Learn More:** Read Simon Sinek's book, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, 2011.*

## Your Beliefs

A belief is a feeling of certainty about what a thing means. Beliefs are created as a result of an event and can be passed down from parents and your environment. We are creating new beliefs consistently. Beliefs help you shape your reality of the world.

You will have beliefs about your potential, your health, relationships, your employment, how children are to behave, the best car plus much more!

There are limiting beliefs and empowering beliefs.

- Limiting beliefs limit your ability to recognise different possibilities in the various areas of your life and career.
- Empowering beliefs are positive beliefs that enable you to move forward to fulfil your potential and goals.

Most people aren't aware of their own beliefs let alone if they are limiting or empowering. The first step is to become aware of your beliefs and then to identify whether they are working for you or against you.

# Stress Management in Practice

## Understand Yourself & Your Environment to Manage Your Stress & Reduce Compassion Fatigue

### What is Stress?

Stress is anything that knocks us out of homeostatic balance as defined by Robert Sapolsky, a world renowned expert in stress.

Homeostasis is our ideal state. Your ideal body temperature, ideal glucose level, ideal blood stream, ideal everything! You feel good, calm and are in a relaxed state. When was the last time you actually experienced that state though?

We need some stress as it moves us towards peak performance. Stress becomes damaging when our body doesn't switch off to the stressor/s.

In the wild, if an animal perceives danger or sees a predator, it will activate its 'fight or flight' response. This allows the animal to quickly run and escape from the danger. Once it is safe, it becomes calm and its body returns to normal.

For people, we are activating our 'fight or flight' stress response often but it usually isn't life threatening situations. It can be activated on Monday morning with the thought of going to work, getting the kids organised, the drive to work, waiting in line, dealing with someone who is rude plus much more.

The problem that develops is there can be many incidents during the day which turn on your stress response and/or you can't return to a calm state as you may be ruminating over what occurred. This is when stress becomes harmful to our bodies.

**It is important to recognise that it isn't the event itself which causes the stress. It is our perception and interpretation of the event which leads to the stress response.**

## What is a Stressor?

A stressor is anything that causes your body to leave homeostasis, which is the calm and relaxed state.

David Posen MD, a doctor who specialises in stress, has found there are external and internal stressors or triggers.

### External:

1. Physical or environmental
2. Social (interaction with people)
3. Organisational
4. Major life events
5. Daily hassles

### Internal:

1. Lifestyle choices
2. Self talk
3. Interpretation of events
4. Mind traps
5. Belief systems
6. Stress prone personalities

In practice this could be:

- a noisy environment with barking dogs or a crowded practice
- conflict with a team member or dealing with an unhappy client
- managing a very busy day
- starting at a new practice
- having to fit in walk ins and emergencies and not being able to take a break
- the computers not working
- the drip pump that keeps beeping!
- an unstable anaesthetic
- the phones that won't stop ringing
- continually thinking about what you may have missed on a case

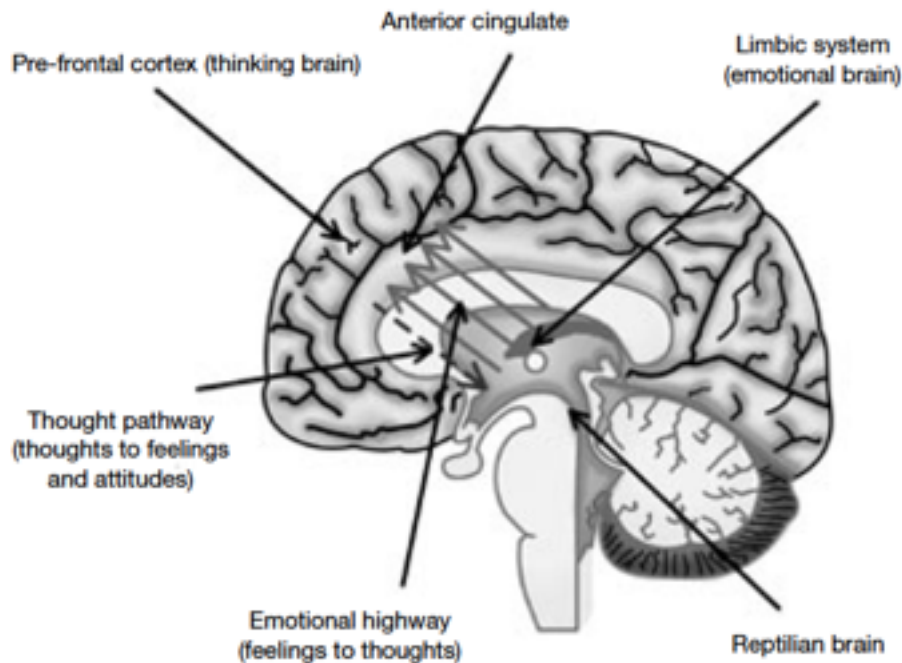
At home a stressor could be:

- noisy neighbours or living in a busy street and not being able to sleep well
- family conflict
- coping with juggling a career, family, school commitments and a marriage
- trying to be a super mum!
- a dirty house
- personal finances



## How does a stressor affect the body?

The Limbic system in our brain, contains the Amygdala which is the emotional centre of the brain. It communicates with the rest of the body.



The Amygdala is activated when a stressor is **perceived**. The amygdala sends a signal to the autonomic nervous system. There are two branches to the autonomic nervous system.

- the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is the accelerator for the stress response. It creates the flight or fight response. This results in the body becoming activated, increased heart rate, increased respiratory rate, flushed face and slowing of digestion.
- the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) is the brake. It helps us calm down , restore and refresh.

When a stressor is perceived, the SNS is activated. The PNS turns off the SNS so you can refuel, restore and relax.

Resilience is learning how to turn off the SNS by activating the PNS.

**Stressors are cumulative. The more life changes or daily hassles you are dealing with the more intense the symptoms of stress.**

The Pre-frontal cortex or frontal lobe is the thinking brain and is responsible for good decision making, weighing consequences of actions and rational thought.

There is an established neural pathway from the Limbic system (emotional brain) to the Pre-frontal cortex (thinking brain). However the neural pathway from the emotional brain has more connections and is like a highway to the PFC whereas the pathway from the PFC to the Limbic system resembles a dirt track.

This is why it is important to build awareness of your emotions as you will be receiving a lot more information to your PFC than you realise. If you don't pay attention, your body does with headaches, fatigue, illness, sore muscles, stomach aches plus more.

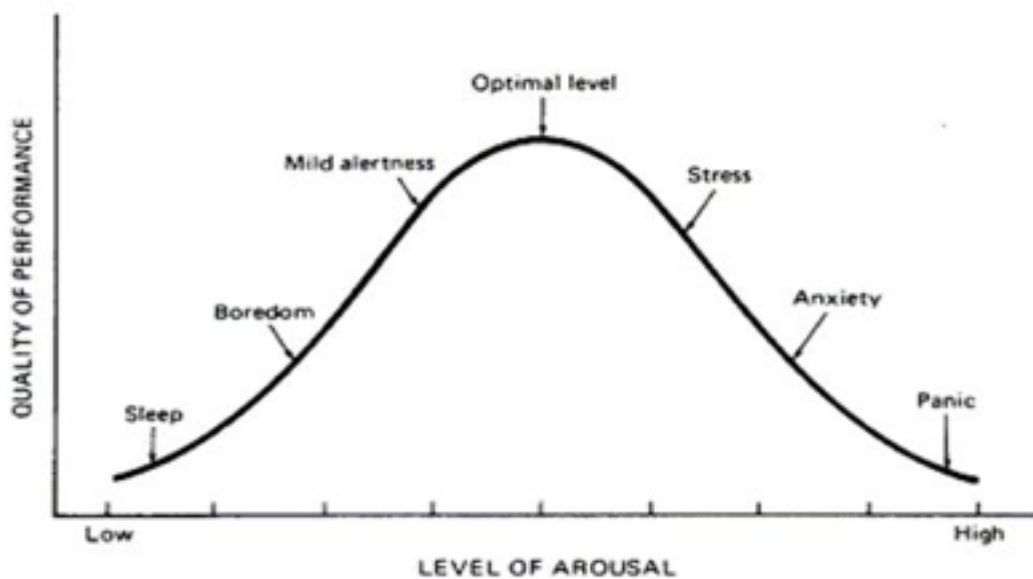
**Just by thinking about a perceived stress will activate your stress response. This is why it is very important to be aware of your mindset and thought patterns.**

**Fear is one of the greatest stressors of all time**

Chronic stress occurs when you are unable to turn off the SNS either by the inability to activate the PNS or by continuous stressors.

Chronic stress or secondary stress doesn't go away and it produces a wear and tear on our minds, body and behaviour.

## Stress and Performance



The Yerkes-Dodson Curve shows our relationship with stress and performance. Some stress is good to reach our optimal performance and this is referred to as eustress.

Eustress is defined as stress that is healthy, or gives one a feeling of fulfilment or other positive feelings. Eustress is a process of exploring potential gains. Eustress is good stress. With stress being a response to an external stimulus, eustress is the feeling you get when you are overcome with

the excitement and anticipation of a desired outcome. Eustress moves you from the left side of the curve to the centre. Distress is when you tip over the edge to the right side of the curve.

## **What does Chronic Stress do to your body?**

In our modern lives it has been found that we have layer upon layer of stress. People may have job stress and money stress and parenting stress and relationship stress and dietary stress and sleep deprivation stress plus the acute stress that occurs every day. What occurs is the layers of stress occur in small increments that people don't even realise they have been living with extreme stress for so long and they don't even recognise that they are stressed.

### **The Physical Effects of Chronic Stress**

- **Cardiovascular effects:** increased heart rate, blood vessels constrict which makes it harder for the heart to pump, increased blood pressure and increased cholesterol leading to plaque build up on the arteries
- **The Brain:** cortisol attacks neurons in the hippocampus and shrinks the neuron and reduces neuronal connections which affects short term memory and learning as well as retrieving long term memories. It also shortens the telomeres on our DNA which contribute to increased ageing.
- **Digestive System:** inhibit digestion and increase stomach acid production. Prolonged stress irritates the large intestines. It can also affect absorption of nutrients from your intestines.
- **The Immune System:** your immunity is reduced therefore you are more likely to become ill. There is evidence that you can develop a hyperactive immune system which increases your risk of autoimmune diseases.
- **Adrenal Fatigue:** the adrenal glands become fatigued with the constant demand.

### **The Psychological Effects of Chronic Stress**

- Serotonin is reduced and you become more prone to anger and aggression. Sleep habits and appetite are affected by serotonin.
- You have a narrower vision so you don't become aware of options and choices and become more pessimistic.
- People may feel numb as they stop becoming aware of what is happening in their body.

### **The Behavioural Effects of Chronic Stress**

- neglect of healthy lifestyle practices
- always busy
- anxiety
- sleep deprivation
- substances abuse as a way of coping

# Thinking Styles That Create and Contribute To Stress

There are certain patterns of thinking that contribute to stress.

## 1. **Jumping to Conclusions**

- making assumptions without the relevant data

## 2. **Tunnel Vision**

- as your mind is unable to process all the information it is presented with, it takes shortcuts. Tunnel vision is only seeing a certain aspect of a situation and drawing an incorrect conclusion

## 3. **Magnifying and Minimising**

- magnifying the negative and minimising the positive leading to a negative mood and compromised resilience
- magnifying the positive and minimising the negative may underestimate the need for change

## 4. **Personalising**

- a tendency to attribute problems to one's own doing
- if this is perceived with a lack of control, it leads to passivity and giving up

## 5. **Externalising**

- blaming others or external circumstances

## 6. **Overgeneralising**

- makes 'always' and 'everything' explanations
- if used with personalising, will assassinate their own character
- if used with externalising, will assassinate the character of others

## 7. **Mind Reading**

- believing you know what those around us are thinking
- partnered with jumping to conclusions

**It is important to be aware of these thinking styles and if you have a predominant pattern that causes stress. If so, work towards identifying the beliefs that occurred during the adversity or event that lead to your response.**

# Compassion Fatigue

**Compassion Fatigue** is a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper. Compassion fatigue is secondary traumatic stress and has been referred to as the 'cost of caring'.

It is not unique to the veterinary profession. Other professions such as counsellors, social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, journalists, teachers, first responders, firefighters plus other professions are at risk.

## How Does It Occur?

**Compassion Fatigue** occurs in the veterinary profession from the toll of working day in and day out with suffering animals and owners. There is a cost to caring in the form of compassion stress. The cumulative stress results in compassion fatigue, which is a form of burnout and PTSD.

### *Factors that contribute directly to compassion fatigue.*

- 1. Client stressors:** Clients behaviours such as high demand or dependent, very emotional, noncompliant, highly anxious can lead to distress or frustration.
- 2. Working conditions:** The first is prolonged exposure to suffering, which occurs from a high workload without a break. This can be from the practice in times of emergencies, understaffing or self imposed by not taking lunch breaks, working overtime and delaying taking holidays.
- 3. Personal risk factors:** This can be a result of traumatic memories which is unresolved conflicts and distress associated with remembering a traumatic event.

An individuals level of empathic ability and concern can lead to emotional depletion.

- 4. Life Demands:** The final factor that contributes to compassion fatigue is life demands which are stressful.

## Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

**Compassion Fatigue** is an emotional desensitisation that occurs as a result of chronic stress from being exposed to trauma on a consistent basis. It is characterised by increased cynicism, loss of professional enjoyment, a sense of hopelessness, depression and high levels of stress and anxiety. It affects an individuals ability to be empathetic and compassionate to others.

Initially the symptoms can be transient and milder and can be related to work or client stress. These symptoms can be fatigue, inability to relax, lack of patience, lack of interest, sleep disturbances and frustration. Compassion fatigue symptoms are to a greater degree, for longer periods with a more significant impairment.

It is essential for people suffering from compassion fatigue to seek professional help to identify their triggers and address the personal issues.

## **Stages of Compassion Fatigue**

(Baranowsky & Gentry, 2010)

### **Stage 1. The Zealot Phase**

- You are enthusiastic and excited
- You put in extra hours and stay late
- You spend time hand-holding clients
- Willing to take on extra work
- I'll do it!

### **Stage 2. The Irritability Phase**

- You start taking short-cuts
- You begin to avoid clients
- Humour can sometimes be a chore
- You daydream or are distracted when clients are talking to us
- Mistakes and oversights occur
- Avoidance of friends and coworkers
- You make concerted efforts to avoid conversation

### **Stage 3. The Withdrawal Phase**

- Clients become irritants
- Our enthusiasm is gone
- Complaints may be made at work or in our personal life
- Exhaustion has become our normal state
- You don't want to talk about work nor admit our profession
- Neglect family, friends, coworkers and self

### **Stage 4. Zombie Phase**

- You are going through the motions
- You are disconnected from our emotions
- You have pulled away from family, friends and coworkers
- You have lost compassion for our patients and clients
- You are lost and feel hopeless

### **Stage 5. Pathology**

- In a perpetual state of overwhelm
- Leave profession
- Somatic illness
- Pervasive intrusion of symptoms

# Prevention of Compassion Fatigue

## *Compassion Satisfaction*

Compassion satisfaction is the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well. It is the positive aspects of helping.

**Refer back to the ‘Your Why’ Exercise and look at your positive beliefs.** These contribute to compassion satisfaction which has a protective affect against compassion fatigue.

## *Building Resilience, Coping and Problem Solving Skills*

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.

It is essential to identify any thinking styles (see the Stress Management section) which contribute to stress and develop new thinking styles which build your resilience.

## *Self Care*

Most veterinarians and other helping professionals neglect self care! They don’t place a high priority on their wellbeing and many deny and avoid dealing with their own challenges.

## *The 4 areas below are critical to your wellbeing*

- 1. Sleep.** You need between 7-9 hours every night for optimal rest and repair of your body and brain. Chronic sleep deprivation affects your mood, memory, reduces performance, increases stress levels and can affect your
- 2. Exercise.** Morning exercise is essential for optimal body and brain health. Melatonin levels drop dramatically and serotonin levels rise. Exercise increases brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) which is like fertiliser for the brain.
- 3. Healthy Diet.** A healthy diet is essential to provide the precursors for neurotransmitters, hormones and ensure cellular health.
- 4. Rest and Rejuvenation.** Without regular and adequate rest, your wellbeing will reduce. It is essential you take a lunch break every day to reset, be able to leave work behind at the end of every shift, enjoy rejuvenating activities every weekend and make time for regular holidays.

## *Positive Psychology Exercises*

The following exercises have been designed to apply what has been learned in positive psychology to improve your wellbeing.

### **1. Three Good Things**

At the end of the day, write down three good things about the day. This instills a habit of happiness. Due to our brain’s negativity bias, you want to build and strengthen neural pathways of appreciation and increase your positive emotions.

### **2. What Went Well**

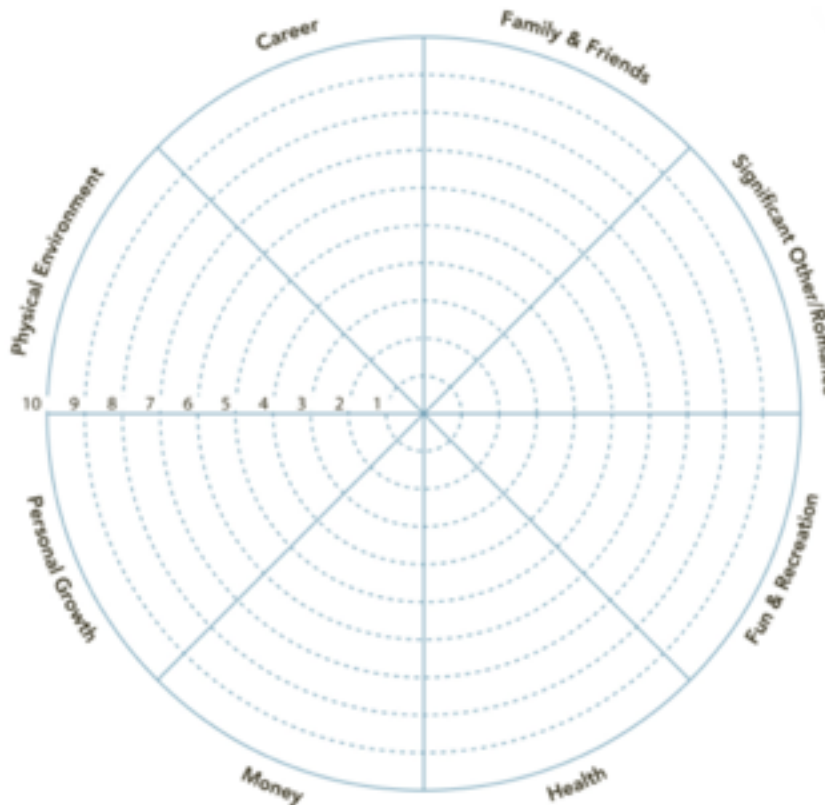
As we have been conditioned to think negatively, we must make a conscious effort to focus on the positive.

This exercise enables you to focus on the things that worked, what you can learn from them and what you can do next time.

# EXERCISES

## Wheel of Life

**Exercise:** Fill in each area below as it currently reflects your life recently. 1 represents low satisfaction and 10 being high satisfaction.



**Career:** Is your career where you want it to be by now? Are you heading in the right direction?

**Family & Friends:** Are your family & friends supportive of you? Are you supportive of your family? Are you engaging friends and socialising to your satisfaction levels?

**Significant Other/Romance:** Do you feel loved? How often are you expressing love to others?

**Recreation & Fun:** Are you enjoying your life and making it fun? Are you satisfied with the level of activity that you do?

**Health & Fitness:** How physically healthy are you? Are you satisfied with your level of fitness? Are you satisfied with your diet?

**Finance & Wealth:** Are you earning enough income to satisfy your current needs? Are you financial setup for future growth in wealth?

**Personal Growth:** How focused are you on personal growth? Are you satisfied with your direction? Are you trying new experiences and seeking to learn?

**Physical Environment:** Does your physical environment support you and contribute to your wellbeing?



# **Your Why.. Your Meaning & Purpose**

Why you do what you do

**EXERCISE:** *Write Down Your Why. You may call it your Meaning, Purpose, Why or Calling.*

**Consider the following questions:**

*What drives you to get out of bed everyday and come into practice?*

*What led you to where you are today?*

*What are you passionate about?*

# Your Beliefs

***BELIEFS EXERCISE:*** *What do you believe in the following areas? Write down your beliefs for each of these areas. Don't filter or censor your thoughts.*

- About yourself
- About your career
- About your workplace
- About your colleagues
- About clients
- About how people are supposed to treat you
- About your home
- About your relationships

# Stress Management in Practice

**EXERCISE:** *What are your triggers for stress?*

**Externally:**

- Your environment at work
  
- Colleagues
  
- Clients
  
- Commute
  
- Your home environment
  
- Family or friends
  
- Finances
  
- Major life events
  
- Daily hassles

**Internally:**

- Self talk
  
- Interpretation of events - positive or negative
  
- Thinking styles - see thinking styles page 12
  
- Belief systems - see next exercise
  
- Stress prone personalities

*How do you react?*

- Internally
- Externally
- Who is affected?

*Look for a pattern. Do you always respond a certain way with a similar emotion?*

*You must become aware of the impact of your reactions on others and how it affects them. Is your reaction to stress causing stress in others? If so, what can you do differently?*

## **Compassion Fatigue**

### **EXERCISE: Identifying Beliefs Which May Contribute to CF**

*Go back to the beliefs exercise and identify which beliefs may be contributing to increased personal, client or workplace stress which increases your risk of compassion fatigue.*

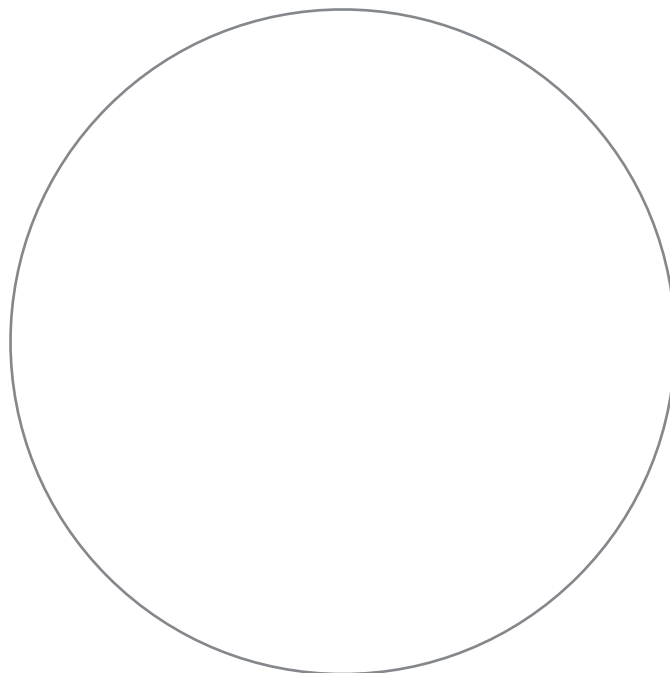
## Prevention of Compassion Fatigue

### **EXERCISE: What needs to change?**

*Now that you have identified your stressors and beliefs which may increase your risk of compassion fatigue, what needs to change?*

### **EXERCISE: Your New Wheel of Life**

*How do you want your Wheel of Life to look? You get to choose the division. It doesn't have to be equal.*



# Summary

Veterinary practice can be physically, emotionally and mentally challenging. You are exposed to client and patient suffering on a consistent basis. Combined with a high demand workload, this can lead to increased stress levels and contribute to compassion fatigue.

It is important to be self-aware of what causes you stress, personally and professionally, and ensure you have adequate coping strategies. Self care is of vital importance to protect yourself against compassion fatigue.

Remember your purpose and meaning for working in practice, ensure you have beliefs that support you and focus on what gives you pleasure and happiness in the practice.

I look forward to hearing how this workshop has impacted you. You are most welcome to contact me anytime.

Warmly,

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