

Burnout and Compassion Fatigue: How to Protect Yourself

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Due to the nature of the veterinary profession, the risk for burnout and compassion fatigue for veterinarians is significant. Burnout and compassion fatigue develops due to overwhelming demands from clients, team members or in practice which leads to disengagement, reduced productivity, energy and enthusiasm. It has a cost to the practice but more importantly, has a detrimental effect on the individual veterinarian. It is important to be aware of the risk factors that can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue and for veterinary practices to become focussed on strategies that promote self care and wellbeing.

What is Compassion Fatigue and Burnout?

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 helper¹. Compassion fatigue is secondary traumatic stress and has been referred to as the 'cost of caring'.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations leading to prolonged stress. It is accompanied by disillusionment and negative feelings.²

How Does It Occur?

Compassion Fatigue occurs 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. Three other factors contribute directly to compassion fatigue. 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. The second factor is traumatic memories which is unresolved conflicts and distress associated with remembering a traumatic event. The final factor that contributes to compassion fatigue is life demands which are stressful¹.

Burnout originates from occupational stress and being overworked. It occurs in individuals with high ideals and expectations. It is also referred to as 'super-achiever sickness'. Dr. Herbert Freudenberger states, "Whenever the expectations level is dramatically opposed to reality and the person persists in trying to reach that expectation, trouble is on the way."⁴

The main factors contributing to burnout in the workplace is a high demand leading to constant level of high stress, loss of autonomy, low support, conflicts within the team and working with distressed and demanding clients⁵.

People who are vulnerable to burnout have unrealistic expectations, perfectionist tendencies, over identify with their career, have a single minded pursuit of goals and limited interests and activities outside of practice².

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

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.

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

Burnout occurs in three stages as described by Dr. Freudenberger².

Stage 1 (early): Fatigue, decreased performance, symptoms of stress. The symptoms are mild, short in duration and occur occasionally.

Stage 1 (later): Exhaustion, frustration, disillusionment.

Stage 2: Denial, impaired judgement, blaming others, defensiveness, apathy, cynicism, depression. The signs and symptoms are more stable, last longer and tougher to get rid of.

Stage 3: Disorientation, despondency, despair, disengagement, distancing, 'dullness and deadness'. The signs and symptoms have become chronic and a physical illness has developed.

When burnout starts to occur, most people work harder despite their fatigue. This accelerates their exhaustion. In both compassion fatigue and burnout, most of the protective strategies that replenish people are stopped, such as exercise and a healthy diet. Sleep is affected which contributes to further fatigue, affects memory and reduces productivity. This starts a vicious cycle of fatigue, reduced productivity, working longer hours as a result to complete the workload and reduced sleep. For burnout, it is important to reduce the workload first. People in stage 3 need to seek medical attention and will require time away from work.

Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention

A. Identify What Depletes You

It is of critical importance to develop self-awareness. This allows you to recognise your individual stressors which contribute to chronic stress. Self-awareness also helps you to identify if you are experiencing any of the signs or symptoms associated with compassion fatigue and/or burnout.

- **Identify Personal Attributes and Mindset**

High achievers have tendencies which can contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout. Individuals who are highly empathetic, perfectionists, work long hours and who are unwilling to seek help are at a higher risk.

Your mindset contributes to your ability to cope with stress. It is essential to become mindful of your values, beliefs and rules which determine your thought patterns. Your mindset may be contributing to your chronic stress and predisposing you to burnout and compassion fatigue.

- **Build Your Client Skills**

A common stressor for many veterinarians is interacting with clients. Improving communicating skills, learning to build rapport to improve client compliance and understanding why clients behave the way they do can reduce your stress levels.

- **Reduce Your Workload**

Why are you working the long hours that you do? It is required by the practice or is it self-imposed? Identify where you can reduce your workload by either structuring the day better, improving your time management, leaving on time and/or asking for reduced hours, will contribute to reducing your stress levels and fatigue.

It is essential to have a lunch break every shift. This break allows you to relax and refresh and will improve your productivity in the afternoon shift.

B. Determine What Replenishes You

It is important to take the time every day for activities that replenish you and bring you back to your set level of wellbeing. Without this, you will find your levels of energy, enthusiasm and ability to cope will reduce with time.

- **Identify Your Compassion Satisfiers**

What do you find satisfying in practice? Being able to experience this on a consistent basis in practice guards against compassion fatigue. Compassion satisfiers have been found to be helping the patients, working with the team and grateful clients.¹

- **Self Care**

Sleep: It is essential for your brain health and your body. Aim for 7 - 9 hours every night. If you sleep only 6 hours each night, you will carry forward a 6 hour sleep debt into the weekend.

Diet: Your brain needs healthy fats and glucose to perform effectively. Eat healthy, nutritious meals and avoid excess caffeine, alcohol and sugar.

Exercise: A 20 minute walk in the morning is great for your body and your brain. Morning exercise reduces your melatonin dramatically which will help you sleep the next night. Your serotonin levels are improved with exercise as well as dopamine and brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) which is essential for learning and memory.

Rest and Rejuvenation: It is essential to take a lunch break every day. This reduces your stress levels and allows your body to rest, ready for the afternoon shift. Ensure you relax on weekends and take the time for activities that replenish you. It is essential that you take at least 2 weeks off at a time and use all of your allocated holidays every year.

Switch Off: Learn to leave work behind when you leave for the day. This will ensure that you aren't transferring your stress and dissatisfaction from your workplace to home.

C. Strengthen You

Building personal resources and skills contributes to a higher level of wellbeing and has a protective effect in times of challenge and acute stress.

- **External Interests and Activities:** Develop interests and find activities outside of practice that you find relaxing, reinvigorating and joyful and do them on a consistent basis.
- **Friends and Family:** Social support is a big predictor of good mental health. Make time for friends and family and you will find you are more positive and energetic afterwards.
- **Use Your Strengths:** Becoming aware of your strengths and being able to use these personally and in practice, has a protective effect. Utilising your strengths reduces stress, increases engagement and fulfilment.
- **Mindset:** Building a resilient, optimistic mindset is essential. Self development is very important for veterinary professionals. Learning to understand and accept yourself contributes to high self esteem, self confidence and fulfilment, personally and professionally. To do this, you must become aware of values, beliefs and thought patterns that are contributing to your wellbeing.

Summary

Veterinarians are high achievers, who are highly compassionate and work hard. Compassion fatigue and burnout is a high risk for veterinarians due to the workload and contact with suffering animals and emotional clients. It is essential for individuals to become self-aware and recognise their stressors and if they are experiencing symptoms consistent with compassion fatigue and burnout. Workplaces must promote self care and wellbeing which encourages individuals to take the necessary steps to look after themselves. Veterinarians who prioritise self care and wellbeing are fulfilled personally and professionally, which improves engagement and productivity in practice.

References

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