



Compassion Fatigue

The Cost of Caring

**Katherine Dobbs,
RVT, CVPM, PHR**

Veterinary medicine is often more than just a career—it is a calling. It attracts compassionate, caring individuals who want to help ill or injured animals. Because of the nature of companion animal medicine, we often find ourselves helping families through suffering and sorrow. However, we do this caring work for others who are in emotional and physical pain at a cost to ourselves, the “cost of caring,” also known as compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue can damage us and the work we do. Teams affected by compassion fatigue may contribute to a toxic work environment by becoming dispirited and cynical at work, making clinical errors, and losing a respectful tone toward clients and patients.

We pay a price personally, as the work of caring becomes more difficult for us to maintain and tolerate. The veterinary practice also pays a price as compassion fatigue in team members leads to higher levels of absenteeism and turnover, excessive amounts of workers compensation claims, changes in coworker relationships, an inability of teams to work well together, aggressive behavior toward clients, unhealthy competition among the team, lack of flexibility, and rampant gossip. It is no surprise that compassion fatigue leads to increased attrition as professionals drop out of the veterinary industry.

Compassion fatigue is characterized by a deep physical and emotional exhaustion and a pronounced change in the worker’s ability to feel empathy for patients, loved ones,

and coworkers. It is marked by a loss of satisfaction in the career. It attacks the very core of what brought us to this vocation; our empathy and compassion for others.

Compassion fatigue doesn’t stop at the end of a shift. It can seep into our home lives and affect non-work relationships. We may experience withdrawal, decreased interest in intimacy, mistrust, isolation from others, overprotection as a parent, projection of anger or blame, intolerance, loneliness, and increased interpersonal conflicts. Compassion fatigue affects us on many levels, and it must be fought on different levels as well.

To minimize the effects of compassion fatigue and combat the personal symptoms, you must make time to take care of yourself. Try to explore or rediscover activities that bring you happiness and also allow you to step out of the caregiver mode. Learn to make yourself a priority for at least a part of every day.

It is helpful to map a transition routine for the end of your workday that helps put the stresses of work behind you and allows you to come home with a refreshed, positive outlook. This could be as easy as listening to your favorite music on the drive home, stopping by a tranquil park for a few moments, immediately playing with a pet after coming through the door, or anything that helps the transition between work and home life.

Because compassion fatigue lives at work, it must be fought on that battlefield as well. The actions you take will

not only help you, but provide relief to the entire team. This can make the organization more emotionally healthy, more productive, and more profitable.

Compassion fatigue must be acknowledged. This means you need to talk openly about compassion fatigue with your coworkers and supervisors. New hires should be informed about this emotional issue that they may encounter, and team members should take compassion fatigue assessment tests on a regular basis. Staff meetings and other team communications should openly discuss compassion fatigue and its main symptoms, so everyone can recognize the enemy. When a crisis occurs, a trauma case arrives, or a longtime patient dies, recognize the effect this has on the team members and provide a safe place for them to talk about their feelings. Form a buddy system so everyone has someone to talk to and provide encouragement.

One of the weapons we have against compassion fatigue is the satisfaction we get from our work. We can derive pleasure from doing the work well, and this helps minimize the effect that compassion fatigue has on us. It also



helps us return each day to perform the work we are called to do.

It is important to look at specific stressors and satisfiers in our work as technicians. Based on a survey published in *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community* by **Charles R. Figley**, PhD, the top stressors and satisfiers affecting daily work are:

- Stressors for Technicians
- ▶ Difficult or noncompliant clients
 - ▶ Problems with coworkers
 - ▶ Not enough time

Satisfiers for Technicians

- ▶ Helping and healing animals
- ▶ Working as a team
- ▶ Thankful clients

From this survey data, it is obvious that there are stressors facing technicians every day and that most of them have nothing to do with the animals in our care. If we can have more positive relationships with our clients, we will experience more job satisfaction. If we work as a team, minimizing conflict and distributing the work load evenly, we will experience more satisfaction from helping and healing animals. These are solid objectives that we and our practices can aim for by learning how to communicate better with both pet owners and coworkers. We will all benefit from reducing compassion fatigue in our professional and personal lives.

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For More Information:

- ▶ Figley CR, ed. *Treating Compassion Fatigue*. Routledge; 2002.
- ▶ Mathieu F. *Transforming Compassion Fatigue into Compassion Satisfaction: Top 12 Self-Care Tips for Helpers*. WHP; 2007.
- ▶ Mathieu F. *Running on Empty: Compassion Fatigue in Health Professionals*. WHP; 2007.
- ▶ Figley CR, Roop RG. *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community*. Humane Society of the United States; 2006.
- ▶ www.compassionfatigue.org
- ▶ www.interfacevethr.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Dobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR

Katherine is the president of interFace Veterinary HR Systems, LLC. She is a compassion fatigue specialist and presents workshops and lectures on the topic. Contact her at ManagementMatters@sbcglobal.net.