Compassion Fatigue in Veterinary Nursing Staff

Michele Pich, MA, MS  
Veterinary Grief Counselor & Instructor  
University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine  
3900 Delancey Street, Philadelphia PA 19104  
mpich@vet.upenn.edu


ABSTRACT: This session will discuss the prevalence, causes and symptoms of compassion fatigue in veterinary medicine in clinicians and support staff. It will focus on self-assessment techniques and strategies for mitigating the negative effects of compassion fatigue that can lead to burn-out or secondary traumatic stress.

INTRODUCTION

Compassion fatigue is a concern that plagues many individual who are caregivers either at home and those who work in helping professions. Veterinary doctors and veterinary nursing staff are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of compassion fatigue. Mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation are all higher in animal care workers than in the general population.

Compassion Satisfaction

Working as a veterinary assistant, technician, or nurse can be extremely satisfying. Some examples of aspects that bring joy or satisfaction are: saving lives, giving hope in healing, and seeing animals you care for survive and thrive. Compassion satisfaction can be defines as the positive aspects of helping. This is the pleasure derived from working in helping professions or car-giving professions such as veterinary nursing. This satisfaction may be related to providing care, working with colleagues, beliefs about self, and the altruism of helping.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue can be defined as a feeling of not being able to give the best of oneself due to emotional and physical exhaustion from high stress and demanding situations at home or in the work-place, especially when caring for others. Some of the symptoms that can be associated with compassion fatigue are a feeling of numbness or disconnection with the situation, difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping, isolation, and avoidance. These are the negative aspects of helping others.

Although anyone caring for an animal can be subject to compassion fatigue, caretakers of pets with stubborn medical problems that require a great deal of care and pets with conditions that result in a high euthanasia rate are especially vulnerable. Pet owners as well as veterinarians and veterinary staff can be especially susceptible. Some of the reasons that compassion fatigue is so pervasive in veterinarians and veterinary nursing staff may have to do with the high rates of death, both natural and through euthanasia. Taking part in euthanasia regularly can take a toll on caregivers. The frustration
associated with not being able to save all of the animals that come in, along with the likelihood of taking that emotional stress home after work can be factors in individual veterinary technician’s experience of compassion fatigue.

**Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress**

Burnout associated with working in a helping profession such as veterinary nursing have to do with work-related hopelessness and feelings of inadequacy. This can manifest in questioning whether the work that one does is even making a difference. Burnout is beyond the point of compassion fatigue and can feel like mental exhaustion which may make someone less effective and efficient at work.

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) has to do with secondary exposure to extremely or traumatically stressful work-related events. Veterinary technicians who deal with a high number of euthanasias as part of their work are more likely to experience STS. This is similar to Post-traumatic stress disorder, but the initial trauma is to the animal, and being empathetic causes deep emotional pain or secondary trauma. If a veterinary nurse deals with animal death at work on a regular basis, he or she may be more likely to be afraid that they will lose their own pet. While there are similar aspects of burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress, the main difference is that burnout is about being worn out, and STS is about being afraid.

**Figure 1 (from www.ProQOL.org)**

![Diagram](https://www.proqol.org/images/resources/professional-quality-of-life.png)

**Support for veterinary staff**

Veterinarians are often taught that those they work with are the patients or clients in need of care, but it is just as important for veterinarians, veterinary nurses, technicians, and other support staff to seek help as well when situations become too stressful for them. Compassion fatigue is a very real concern for people in any helping profession. Compassion fatigue can be felt by caretakers of humans or animals at home, as well as by those who care for others as a profession. Often the most compassionate individuals are drawn to helping professions, but they are also more susceptible to compassion fatigue and caretaker burnout.
We all live in multiple spheres, including the work environment, the “animals helped” environment, and the personal environment. Where there are extreme stressors in one or more areas, it may be necessary to supplement in other areas. Altruistic compassion satisfaction can potentially override compassion fatigue. Combatting problems associated with compassion fatigue and potentially burnout and STS starts with assessing the problem. By completing the Professional Quality of Life self-assessment (instrument and interpretation of results available at: www.ProQOL.org), veterinary staff can get a sense of where they are on the spectrum. This will help determine which problem areas can change and what needs to be externally supplemented. While one may not be able to change the number of euthanasias they encounter at work, it may be possible to improve positive coping skills. Meditation, yoga, and other general wellness practices may help those in the field who are especially susceptible to the negative impacts of being in a helping profession be better equipped to come with these difficult work encounters.

**Figure 2: (from www.ProQOL.org)**

![Diagram showing the relationship between work environment, client environment, personal environment, and compassion satisfaction, fatigue, and burnout.](image)

**REFERENCES**

Available upon request.