Oftentimes, people with the greatest ability to empathize or connect with others are drawn to careers in caring. However, this same ability can increase the emotional toll that comes with prolonged exposure to trauma, and is an often unrecognized occupational hazard.

Veterinary and shelter staff are exposed to pain and suffering on a regular basis, which is further exacerbated by the stressful conditions they work in. Over time, this can lead to secondary traumatic stress disorder, otherwise known as compassion fatigue.

What is compassion fatigue?
Compassion fatigue can be described as physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as a profound decrease in the ability to empathize. It can dramatically reduce the ability to successfully perform at work. If left untreated, compassion fatigue can have significant detrimental effects on quality of life and mental and physical health.

Symptoms
Early recognition is critical to addressing compassion fatigue. Everyone will have their own warning signs that indicate compassion fatigue, but they may include the following:

- Exhaustion
- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- Anger and irritability
- Increased use of alcohol & drugs (self-medicating)
- Diminished sense of enjoyment of career
- Disruption to world view; heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- Hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional material
- Absenteeism—missing work, taking too many sick days
- Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients/patients

Workplace strategies
It’s important for those suffering from compassion fatigue to know they’re not alone—and that can start by providing support at work. Here are some strategies for supporting workers with compassion fatigue:

- Create a work environment where employees feel comfortable speaking with supervisors about these issues
- Support groups and open discussions/education about compassion fatigue at meetings
- Wellness programs—American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provides a model program for wellness

(Continued)
Suicide risk
A mental health survey for veterinarians revealed that one in six of them have contemplated suicide. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website provides a number of useful resources, including how to find counseling services and support groups. Share these resources with your staff.
https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/

Self-care
Practicing self-care is vital to maintaining good health, keeping up with job demands, and the ability to better care for others. Often, those who are most concerned with the care of others tend to neglect themselves. A good self-care practice can look different for everyone but in general it should include:

- Make arrangements for work breaks to help better manage stress and high workloads
- Balanced, healthy diet and proper hydration
- Regular physical activity
- Routine schedule of restful sleep
- Balance between work and leisure
- Honoring emotional needs
- Active relaxation such as yoga or meditation
- Educate yourself further about compassion fatigue

For more self-care tips, visit:
https://www.avma.org/compassion-fatigue
http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/
the-cost-of-caring