

Compassion fatigue

More resources

For additional safety and health resources browse SAIF's preventing injuries topics page available at saif.com/prevent.

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

- Use of materials including discussion topics, videos, and best practices available at no cost online or through veterinary schools and associations
- Mixing up appointment types (i.e. “happier” visits vs. emotionally demanding visits)
- Regular breaks
- Routine check-ins
- Mental health days
- Onsite counseling
- Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.
- Breaking up time with patients/clients with other types of tasks
- Managers partnering with the clinic on reasonable and achievable goals for staff, and avoid the “we can do it all” image
- Validate feelings of sadness in employees at times of euthanasia or severe pet illness

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

Take this well-being assessment for veterinarians from the American Veterinary Medical Association: bit.ly/4ba72uK.

Read more about compassion fatigue from Not One More Vet: bit.ly/3uajkmn.

Suicide risk

Veterinarians are 3 to 5 times more likely to die by suicide than members of the general population, according to a 2019 study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline has many useful resources, including how to find counseling services and support groups. Share these resources with your team (988lifeline.org/).

