

# CHAPTER 25

## DEALING WITH COMPASSION FATIGUE

### CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. What is Compassion Fatigue?
3. Symptoms and Causes
4. Prevention
5. Treating the Condition
6. Further Resources



## 1

## INTRODUCTION



Compassion fatigue, sometimes known as ‘vicarious trauma’ or ‘secondary traumatic stress’, affects people who are exposed to the traumatic suffering of others. This is a recognised psychological condition and is known to affect animal protection workers who deal with animal suffering and abuse and shelter workers who have to deal with euthanasia. It also affects doctors, nurses, emergency-service personnel, counsellors, social workers, charity workers and clergy members. Nearly everyone who performs emotionally intense animal protection work (particularly investigations, rescues, cruelty case work and euthanasia) can be susceptible to compassion fatigue.

The concept of compassion fatigue emerged only in the last several years in psychological literature. It represents the cost of caring for traumatised people or animals. Compassion fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to working with suffering and traumatic events. Professionals who work with people or animals, particularly those who are suffering, must contend with not only the normal stress or dissatisfaction of work, but also with the emotional and personal feelings for the suffering.

Compassion fatigue may result in poor job performance and plummeting self-esteem and can even drive some people out of animal protection work entirely. It is not the same as ‘burn-out’, but can cause this. Those who suffer from it can also experience tension in their home lives and can even fall into clinical depression or suffer from other mental-health problems.

## 2

## WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

**COMPASSION FATIGUE IS AN EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL FATIGUE OR EXHAUSTION THAT TAKES OVER A PERSON AND CAUSES A DECLINE IN HIS OR HER ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE JOY OR TO FEEL AND CARE FOR OTHERS.**

It can affect individuals who are giving out a great deal of energy and compassion to others over a period of time, but are not able to get enough back to reassure themselves that the world is a hopeful place. It is the constant outputting of compassion and caring over time that can lead to these feelings.

Professionals who witness or listen to the stories of fear, pain and suffering of animals may feel similar fear, pain and suffering – simply because they care. Indeed, it is often this ability to empathise that brings people to work in the animal protection field in the first place. If you ever feel as though you are losing your sense of self and your capacity for enjoyment and that your job is the only thing that matters to you, then you may be suffering from compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is not ‘burn-out’. Burn-out is associated with stress and hassles involved in your work; it is very cumulative, is relatively predictable and frequently a vacation or change of job helps a great deal. Compassion fatigue is very different. This is a state of tension and preoccupation with the individual or cumulative trauma of animals as manifested in one or more ways including re-experiencing the traumatic event and avoidance or numbing of reminders of the event. Although similar to critical incident stress (being traumatised by something you actually experience or see), compassion fatigue is more like secondary post-traumatic stress.



## 3

## SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES

The signs of compassion fatigue can mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder, which can afflict people who have survived a traumatic event like combat, rape, or assault. Symptoms include sleeplessness, irritability, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, avoidance of certain tasks, isolation from colleagues, feelings of helplessness and inadequacy and flashbacks.

Frank M. Ochberg, a Michigan psychiatrist who founded Gift From Within, a non-profit group for people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, says compassion fatigue happens when “the milk of human kindness dries up. You forget why you wanted to help [people] in the first place.” It can, he says, lead to excessive drinking or other unhealthy behaviours.

Compassion fatigue develops over time – taking weeks, sometimes years to surface. Basically, it is a low level, chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in your life. Over time, your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion. You also might experience an emotional blunting – whereby you react to situations differently than one would normally expect.

Employees of animal-related charities, such as shelters that euthanise unwanted pets, can be especially hit hard by compassion fatigue. This can contribute to the high annual turnover rates at some shelters. Unlike every other type of charitable work, killing is a part of the job at most animal shelters, notes Diane Less Baird, President of Angels for Animals, a shelter and pet-owner education centre in Greenford, Ohio. “You can only hold so many animals in your arms and feel the life go out of them,” she says, “without it starting to suck the life out of you.”

What’s more, says Carol A. Brothers, a clinical psychologist in Annapolis, Maryland, who conducts compassion fatigue workshops for animal shelters around the USA, shelters tend to encourage workers to remain stoic when euthanising or turning away unwanted pets. In addition, those workers may be less likely than other charity employees to get support from people outside work because often friends and family do not understand the level of empathy with animals and their suffering.



## 4

## PREVENTION

**Personal prevention:** Preventing compassion fatigue is really the key. It is much easier to stop it from occurring in the first place than it is to repair things once it sets in. You have to continually practice good emotional health maintenance along the way and maintain some sort of balance in your life. In your life you should learn to take as well as to give. Treat yourself sometimes and schedule space for relaxation. You also need to put yourself in situations in which you see the positives in life, for example, attending a field trip with your child where you are truly enjoying the experience, or volunteering where you are able to give and receive. Sometimes, you cannot prevent compassion fatigue from occurring. However, practising some of these techniques can restore your ability to feel compassion and energy.



**New employees:** Managers of animal protection societies should always tell new or prospective employees what to expect and advise them of appropriate preventative measures to take. Many do not yet do this, but awareness is greater in human charities. At the Bridges Centre, a grief counselling organisation in Louisville, Kentucky, that is associated with a chain of non-profit hospices, during orientation managers tell new workers about resources, such as support groups for staff members and encourage their use, says Barbara L. Bouton, the Centre Director. “We recognise that compassion fatigue is probably inevitable in the work we do,” she says.



**Establishing support systems:** Giving employees opportunities to talk about the emotional aspects of their work and their feelings can help keep compassion fatigue from taking hold. After a particularly traumatic event occurs at work, start a conversation about it. The truth is that when people can show their feelings, they do better work. They have more energy.

Support groups can make a world of difference in keeping charity workers on the job and effective.

Informal support, such as providing relaxation rooms for employee use, organising relaxation sessions and yoga lessons can also help. Some animal protection societies already organise lunchtime relaxation sessions for their employees and this is an excellent idea.

Some organisations find other creative ways to combine both the need for acknowledging loss and for lightening up. At the Bridges Centre, for example, staff meetings begin with quiet reflection, the lighting of a candle and the reading of the names of patients who have died recently in the hospices. Yet the same meetings sometimes also include comic relief in the form of comedy actions, dramas and jokes between staff members.

Where possible, some organisations might consider rotating people out of particularly tough jobs after a period of time. Organisations could also consider sponsoring a workshop led by an outside expert.

In addition, employees should be encouraged to seek out stress-relieving activities outside of work. The organisation could locate and make information available about suitable activities in the area.

Keeping an eye not only on the work employees do, but also on the manner in which they do it, can help prevent compassion fatigue from overwhelming workers. The Red Cross, for example, was diligent about monitoring the emotional state of its volunteers reuniting refugee families in Kosovo who had been separated by war. They would watch for the amount of anger they would express with refugees and the number of times the volunteers would go out on assignments. They would also go to the bar in the hotel to see who was there, how often they were there and how long they stayed.

If an employee's behaviour has changed, he or she could be persuaded to take a test that measures compassion fatigue and encouraged to seek help if needed. If an employee needs help, it is also possible to advise a referral to a counsellor (who understands compassion fatigue) outside the organisation, where counselling can be carried out without fear of job loss, or loss of face.

## 5

### TREATING THE CONDITION

Charles R. Figley, a Professor in the School of Social Work at Florida State University who founded the Traumatology Institute, says that those who experience compassion fatigue find it is usually alleviated simply by acknowledging the problem and getting support. "The people who experience this are often the best and the brightest. They have extra sensitivity," he says. And not giving these workers help can undermine not only an organisation but also its long term mission. "If we don't do something about compassion fatigue, we're going to lose people."

The most important step is to acknowledge that you may be experiencing it. All of us have multiple demands and energy drains in our lives – some positive, some negative – which all require a great deal of emotional and physical attention. There are, however, many hands-on things you can do to alleviate the feelings of compassion fatigue. For one, start refocusing on yourself. Before you can tend to others and be sensitive to their needs, you have to take care of your own well-being. This can be as simple as getting plenty of rest, becoming more aware of your dietary and recreational

habits and cutting out negative addictions in your life like nicotine, alcohol and caffeine. Remember, the healing process takes time, as does the development of the problem.

Vacations are healthy, restorative interventions that can head off negative feelings so that they do not progress beyond the point of no return. Transferring to another unit either temporarily or permanently is another alternative. A job that is more mechanical and less animal service-oriented can sometimes give people just the respite they need to regain their balance and their empathy.

Professionals who suffer from compassion fatigue must be persuaded to give themselves a break. They should also be encouraged to focus on the things they are doing right and not to become overwhelmed.

**THE SUCCESSES, HOWEVER MINOR, SHOULD ALWAYS BE CELEBRATED AND REMEMBERED. THESE SHOULD BE THE FOCUS, RATHER THAN THE MANY SUFFERING ANIMALS THAT THE ORGANISATION IS UNABLE TO HELP.**

## 6

### FURTHER RESOURCES

#### Websites

##### Compassion Fatigue, including self test

[www.vaonline.org/care.html](http://www.vaonline.org/care.html)

##### Compassion Fatigue Articles

[www.vaonline.org/doc\\_compassion.html](http://www.vaonline.org/doc_compassion.html)

##### Compassion Fatigue – the Stress of Too Much Caring

[www.ace-network.com/cfspotlight.htm](http://www.ace-network.com/cfspotlight.htm)

##### Compassion Fatigue – self test

[www.ace-network.com/cftest.htm](http://www.ace-network.com/cftest.htm)

##### How Compassion Fatigue Can Overwhelm Charity Workers

<http://philanthropy.com/jobs/2002/03/21/20020321-974239.htm>

##### Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

<http://pspinformation.com/caregiving/thecaregiver/compassion.shtml>

#### Books

##### Compassion Fatigue: Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorders In Those Who Treat The Traumatized

Charles R. Figley

Publisher: Brunner-Mazel Publisher

ISBN: 0876307594

##### The Master's Touch: Coping with Compassion Fatigue

Barrie E. Henke

Publisher: Concordia Publishing House

ISBN: 0570094348

**Treating Compassion Fatigue**

Charles R. Figley

Publisher: Taylor and Francis Group; (September 2002)

ISBN: 1583910530

