

Compassion fatigue – when caring hurts

D A Chesterfield

College of Science, Massey University, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North

Introduction

Animal care professionals are at risk of Compassion Fatigue. Veterinarians experience death at a higher rate than human doctors simply because the life span of animals is generally shorter than that of humans. Today throughout New Zealand many animal shelters continue to be forced to euthanase animals due to over population or poor animal health. SPCA Animal Welfare Inspectors and Animal Control Officers witness neglected and abused animals on a daily basis. All these professionals experience a great deal of grief, stress and trauma in their work.

Stress and compassion fatigue

For many of us today stress is a common concern. Long hours, deadlines, client expectations and unexpected outcomes all provide us with a daily dose of stress at work. Mortgage, finances and family can further increase these. Most of us cope well, for most of the time. Problems arise when we see no end in sight and we have stopped caring for ourselves.

In professions that care for others such as dentists, doctors, nurses, veterinarians, animal technicians, shelter workers, many find themselves at risk of not only the daily doses of stress described above but also risk compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is described by Figley (1995) as stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatised or suffering person. This form of fatigue arises when the caring for others is at the expense of oneself. Compassion fatigue impacts most often on those carers that care the most; carers that go the extra mile to ensure the constant well being of those in their care. Veterinarians, animal technicians, vet nurses, shelter workers, are all caring people in a caring profession and as such are vulnerable to this form of stress.

In recent times, pets have often been elevated to a status equivalent to humans and as such the pet's life is highly important to the pet owner. For example, animal shelters often speak of rehoming pets as 'adoption'. Pet owners often wish to prolong the life of their pets 'at all cost' (Phillips 2012). With a deep commitment to the welfare of their patients and clients, veterinarians can often feel they have failed if they can not heal or prolong quality of life. This defeat can often be taken personally, and if not dealt with can be internalised and at worst magnified.

Veterinarians in Large Animal practices servicing the rural community have their own unique stresses to deal with. Large scale dairy farms can put tremendous pressure and stress on not only farm staff but also the veterinarian that visits to provide treatment for the sick animals. Lameness, calving difficulties, thin cows are but a few of the on going issues seen on farm. It can be difficult tending to lame cows (on large scale dairy these could be as many as 200-400 cows) often on a weekly basis and watching the slow often painful recovery of these animals. We have yet to elevate the cow to the status of our pet dog or cat but for farmers the monetary value of each cow and what she can produce is very important to the whole farm operation and so the veterinarian is again under pressure to maintain the health of each animal. Repetitive care and treatment on such farms can certainly take its toll especially if the veterinarian is working in isolation a good deal of the time.

Symptoms

Compassion fatigue is often referred to as an expanded form of burn out and can leave the carer feeling:

- Depressed
- Anxious
- Exhausted
- Angry
- Ineffective and
- Detached

These feelings develop over time, escalating gradually; such feelings are often not dealt with until they have significantly impacted on the carer. Often, such feelings are unexpected because they have been doing the same job for some time with no perceived issues. One day however, they find they can no longer do what is been asked of them.

Dr Miller (JAVMA News 2004) states that compassion fatigue is not an exact science and as such is difficult to discuss. An individual's response to an emotional event is very subjective. This can therefore make it difficult to discuss and share feelings with others.

Carers suffering from compassion fatigue may be irritable and suffer from mood swings because they are dealing with an emotional roller coaster of feelings. Other symptoms such as sleep loss can lead to poor work performance. Exhaustion also makes it difficult to have a normal life outside of work. An important coping strategy is to strive for a healthy balance in life.

Intensive care, repetitive manipulations and concern for the welfare of the animals can lead to a carer being in a constant state of anxiety. Other contributing factors leading to cumulative stress are heavy and prolonged workloads, working in isolation and lack of support and training.

Coping strategies

We all have the ability to experience stress. Some of us are able to handle stress effectively, due to a strong commitment to self, a sense of meaningfulness and an internal sense of control (Gelberg and Gelberg 2005). In a study of New Zealand doctors, Huggard 2006, found a relationship between high level of resilience and emotional competence to low levels of compassion fatigue.

With growing recognition that compassion fatigue is an occupational stress comes the increasing awareness of the need to develop ways to 'care for our carers' (Huggard and Huggard 2008).

Organisations have a responsibility to care for staff. Ensuring a safe work environment, manageable workloads, making staff aware of any risks associated with their work, and rotating staff in areas recognised as stressful are but a few of the employer's responsibilities. Fostering a culture of care within the work environment is important. Peer support groups, creating a culture of fun and sense of belonging and the development of other support networks is seen as other ways in which organisations can take responsibility for staff in a stressful working environment.

The final responsibility however rests with us.

Consider altering your expectations of yourself and others so they are achievable and learn to adapt instead of needing to be in control all the time. Exercise and nutrition is often overlooked in high stress workers but is proven to reduce stress. Practicing good emotional health maintenance and ensuring a healthy balance of work and home life will enable you to manage and relieve stress quickly. Learning to leave work at work, at the end of each day is very important. A debriefing ritual may be helpful. Aim to celebrate the successes of the day and undertake a set of routines that will enable you to disengage from work. Taking time to reflect can be therapeutic in itself.

These proactive steps and learning to recognise compassion fatigue symptoms in ourselves and our co-workers, and diligently educating ourselves about compassion fatigue, will ensure we stay healthy and effective in our work with animals. Basically, learn to take care of yourself, recognise when you need help and ask for it, reflect on successes, keep things in perspective and lastly be kind to yourself.

Conclusion

Compassion fatigue can develop when our empathy for those we care for impacts on our ability to look after ourselves. Giving too much of ourselves can deplete our internal emotional resources, decreasing our level of compassion and increasing our level of fatigue. This level of caring can hurt us and should not be seen as a flaw in our character or professionalism. In fact it is those that care the most, often suffer the most. Our love of animals, our desire to relieve pain and suffering, to tend the sick and injured are reasons why we entered such professions. Compassionate care is paramount in all that we do for animals. By recognising the symptoms of compassion fatigue and practicing self care we can continue to fulfil our desire to care for those that can not speak for themselves.

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