

## **ANIMAL CARE PROFESSIONALS ARE VULNERABLE TO COMPASSION FATIGUE AND BURNOUT**

**By Nancy Mullins, M.A. (April 1, 2004)**

Research is starting to document that Animal Care Professionals are being traumatized in many of the same ways that other rescuers/first responders (firefighters, police, paramedics, corpsmen, service people in combat, Red Cross volunteers) are traumatized by what they witness. Some studies are beginning to suggest that animal care professionals may be #1 in vulnerability to Compassion Fatigue and Burnout.

### **What is Compassion Fatigue?**

Compassion Fatigue is emotional exhaustion, caused by the stress of caring for traumatized or suffering animals or people (Charles Figely, Ph.D., Director, Florida State University Traumatology Institute). All the symptoms of this emotional exhaustion are normal reactions to abnormal/traumatic events. You are not crazy.

### **What causes Compassion Fatigue and Burnout?**

**(Some of the factors that make people in animal care professions vulnerable)**

1. You have a constant exposure to trauma--a daily experience with the rescue of animals that have been injured, abandoned, neglected, abused, or tortured; and you face a huge never-ending volume of these animals. (Trauma is anything that shocks the system, anything that would be shocking to any human being.)
2. You are often dealing with at best an ignorant public, but often with an ungrateful or hostile public, or a finger-pointing public. Your jobs demand that you be courteous and try to educate, while inside you may be feeling despair about what's happening to animals in our country. You may feel angry or sick inside. Often you face a public that doesn't want to know what happens in shelters or out on the road in the truck. In our country, the realities of shelter work have been isolated. Coming out publicly is important. We need to know.
3. You are trying to do all you want to do with very limited resources. Your hearts can be in this work, but the reality is that you can struggle to make ends meet.
4. Not only are you in professions that are poorly understood, and often greatly under-appreciated, you are in the only professions in which you have to end the lives of the very animals you care about and are committed to, often every day.
5. On top of what you face at work, you have a life outside of work and often that life has its own issues and losses. You may be having financial, health, or relationship problems. You may be facing the health issues of your parents or grandparents or tough things

going on with your children; and although you are professional and these get put on the shelf when you come to work, they affect your work and the impact it has on you.

6. Not only does your present life have an impact on your work, what has happened in your life in the past and in your childhood has a bearing on how you are affected by your work. For example, you may be adopted and when you see animals dropped off or abandoned, this will touch your heart in a special way. You may have grown up in families where no one talked about feelings, or where there was abuse or violence, or where feelings were numbed by addictions (alcohol, drugs, food, etc.), or where there were significant losses. If the only anger you ever saw was out of control or violent, the anger of your colleagues and the public can be disturbing. If there were important losses (the death of a parent, a brother or sister, your own pets, or an illness), and no one talked to you about your grief and sadness, the volume of loss you face in your work and the grief and tears of your colleagues can be very hard to bear. If you have been repeatedly hurt by people, animals who don't hurt you in the same ways, may feel safer. Sometimes what we grew up with can carry over into having issues with people in authority. So when things happen at work, they often touch these wounds. Each of you is unique in how you will be affected by this work.

7. Not only do you face all these things every day, but you also often must face them alone. There's often very little time or opportunity in the work day to talk with your colleagues about what you are experiencing and how you are feeling. So frustrations go unspoken, tears and anguish are swallowed, anger is stuffed, fear cannot be shown.

**This is where compassion fatigue and burnout come from**--from constantly being exposed to harsh, painful realities (trauma) and not being able to talk about what happened and how you feel about it, by having to stuff it in order to cope. And all you've stuffed builds up into a reservoir, until you're exhausted, or angry, or feel like you'll explode, or feel that you hate all people, or you've lost all your enthusiasm, joy, and hope. You can feel depressed and want to quit your job, that you can't take it anymore. You may feel sad, with your tears always just below the surface. You may feel cynical, or numb, or hardened, like nothing phases you. You may have nightmares or flashbacks (where you repeatedly see images of suffering animals from the past) or you may switch back and forth, one minute feeling angry, the next minute numb, the next minute sad, the next minute depressed.

**Does any of this sound familiar?**

Remember, these symptoms of emotional exhaustion are all normal reactions to abnormal/traumatic events. You are not crazy. Many of you come to shelter work out of love for animals and a desire to help them, and then you are constantly confronted with what to anyone would be traumatic/shocking. The work takes its toll.

**Next Month:** More on the symptoms of Compassion Fatigue and what to do about it.

*Nancy Mullins, M.A., is a licensed marriage and family therapist. She has presented workshops for 20 years on grief, loss, trauma, and childhood abuse, nationally and internationally, including in Oklahoma City, Northern Ireland, and Zimbabwe (12 years as a member of the staff of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross). She is trained in Critical Incident Debriefing. She is a partner in Support Services for Animal Care Professionals (SSACP) where she has staffed Workshops for animal welfare workers and veterinary practices.*

© 2004 SSACP