WHAT TO DO ABOUT COMPASSION FATIGUE

By Nancy Mullins, M.A. (June, 2004)

What is it?
"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.

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 number one in vulnerability to Compassion Fatigue and Burnout.

See article, Animal Care Professionals are Vulnerable to Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

How to Know if you are in Trouble - Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue:

Emotional:
When you are constantly exposed to harsh, painful realities (trauma) and you are not able to debrief (to talk about what happened and how you feel about it), all that you stuff inside builds up into a reservoir, until you are exhausted, or angry, or feel like you'll explode, or feel that you hate all people, or you've lost your enthusiasm, joy, and hope.

- You can feel depressed and want to quit your job. You can feel stuck in depression.
- You may have sudden outbursts of anger.
- You may feel sad, with your tears always just below the surface. Many long-time workers are experiencing long-term grief
- 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).
- You may switch back and forth, one minute feeling angry, the next minute numb, the next minute sad, the next minute depressed.

Occupational/Social:

- You may feel isolated from family and friends.
- You may have problems relating to your co-workers or the public.
- You may snipe at others, be aggressive, sarcastic, uncooperative.

- You may notice your usual high productivity is now low, or you are frequently late to work, or accident prone.

Physical:

- You may feel exhausted or ill.
- You may develop frequent health problems.
- You may have difficulty sleeping, difficulty breathing.
- You may start abusing alcohol, food, drugs (or doing other destructive behavior) to suppress your feelings.

Intellectual:

- You may have difficulty concentrating, difficulty making decisions.
- Your thoughts may race.

Spiritual:

- You may feel hopeless or cynical.

A combination of these symptoms can lead to burnout and is often responsible for the loss of many talented, valuable professionals. (Doug Fakkema). Does any of this sound familiar? Remember, these symptoms of emotional exhaustion are all normal reactions to abnormal/traumatic events. You are not crazy. *If you are experiencing these symptoms, you need to take action, get support, institute a self-care program as described below. If any of these symptoms last more than two to three weeks, and you have instituted a self-care program, you might consider a few sessions of counseling.*

What to do About Compassion Fatigue - What Helps
Dr. James Fogarty, an expert in critical incident stress management and trauma debriefing, states you must do 4 things:

1. **Talk about each of your experiences with enough detail that you can connect emotionally with what you experienced**.
2. **Acknowledge and safely express your feelings**. Find a colleague you trust and use the 5-Minute Sharing to debrief (five-minute vent to take the lid off, cool it down).
   You can ask each other for five minutes to share.
   The person speaking for five minutes can say, "*I need to tell you something that happened to me today. Would you just listen?*" (The person speaking could describe the worst experience he's had this week, the best experience he's had this week, and one thing he is willing to do to take care of himself in the next week. These were used at Ground Zero.)
   The person listening for five minutes just listens. They do not say a word. They do not fix you, offer advice, interrupt with one of their horrendous stories. They just listen. After five minutes, they say one short sentence that is true, like,

"*Thank you for speaking about that*," or "*That is very moving to me*," or "*That must have been very hard*," etc.

There is nothing like professional peers who, often unlike family and friends, will know immediately what you are talking about, will understand without your explaining, and will not judge you. This simple sharing, this simple taking of responsibility for your feelings, will do wonders to eliminate sniping, gossiping, polarization, triangulation, and negativity.

Other ways to express your feelings in safe and appropriate ways: crying, giving sounds to your feelings, any physical release, drawing, journaling, music, a silent scream (One shelter wants to install a soundproof room and a punching bag.)

3. **Brainstorm options and find solutions--take action**
   You already do this in ingenious ways. Try doing steps one and two first. Animal Care Professionals must be able to offer suggestions and help formulate policy.
4. **Take care of yourselves**
   Do you take as careful care of yourself as you do of the animals? You have to be as committed to your own resiliency as you are to the care of the animals. You need to care for yourselves in order to give care to the animals.

   Deep Breath: Inhale, filling belly, letting shoulders down. Exhale slowly. Slump body on exhale. Repeat. Now as you inhale and fill belly, feel your sitz bones. Let your belly and the floor of pelvis soften and expand as you inhale. This breath can be an anchor. When confronted by someone, faced with a sad or angry person, say to yourself, I can breathe and soften my belly and the floor of my pelvis. I don't have to calm them down. I will calm myself and tell myself I am glad they came to the shelter. I am glad they brought their animal here.

   Anchors: As you breathe you can recall moments of triumph, a happy ending, the starfish story.

   Begin staff meetings/department meetings with a check-in. For example, "How are you feeling?" You may vary the question. The worker does not have to explain (Tom Colvin, Iowa)

   Take Time out following difficult events: Take a break after painful or other stressful incidents. Pull in. Self-soothe. What touches your heart, gives you relief, peace? It can be prayer or meditation. Walk outside.

   Get Back-Up: Ask a colleague to handle a task that you know you are not up to at the time

   Pet the Animals

   Wise people tell us to eat well, to decrease our intake of sugar and caffeine (doughnuts, comfort food) during times of stress

Alcohol and drugs rob you of rich full life you deserve in return for your work for animals

Stay hydrated (i.e., drink water)

Exercise: Walk, walk in the woods, hike, ski, ride a bike. Tolerance to stress can be improved through regular exercise and relaxation. People who exercise have a higher sense of self-esteem and lower rates of depression.

Acknowledge/thank a colleague

Laugh

Set boundaries: Remember, you teach that it is cruel not to train an animal/set boundaries with an animal. You are being cruel to yourselves if you do not set boundaries.

Writing: You can write to express feelings. You can write yourself the letter you deserve from your supervisor. You can write yourself the letter you would like to receive from your parents. One ACO wrote himself a letter from all the dogs he had euthanized (from the perspective of where they are now).

Self-talk: How many of you say things to yourself that are as kind and generous as the things you say to your colleagues, your friends, the animals?
Faced with an angry person, you can breathe and silently say something true and positive to yourself, like, "*I am doing a wonderful job*," "*I am a wonderful adoption counselor*," "*I am wonderful with animals*," "*I am a dog whisperer/cat whisperer*," "*Dogs trust me*," "*I am an excellent supervisor*," etc.
This is the positive self-talk that is true and that you deserve.

If you are having flashbacks/recurring images/nightmares, they will generally dissipate over time and become less intrusive. They are very normal. Lots of times we get scared about them. You can do thought stopping, choose not to think about it. You may need help to do this.

Light a candle or create another kind of ritual

Other Ways to Cope:
Animal Care Professionals across this country have spoken about other ways they are taking good care of themselves. Try one:

- Shift to something entirely different
- Focus on a simple, concrete task to bring you down
- Sleep, nap, rest, vegetate in front of the TV, sit in a hot tub
- Go fishing, make bread, take a vacation

- Pursue interests outside of work and unrelated to caregiving
- Hang out with friends who are not in animal work
- Get hugs
- Sing in the choir, paint
- Make a gratitude list
- Do yoga
- Gallows humor-level of absurd
- Bitch on the internet
- Meditate, pray, talk to God
- Create a memorial garden with perennials
- Help someone else

Your work is so compelling. You are doing a good job. You are making a difference. Will you create your own self-care program to maintain your own resiliency and inoculate yourself against compassion fatigue and burnout? Will you be good to yourself, gentle with yourself? Will you cherish yourself as much as you cherish the animals?

Listen to Doug Fakkema (Associated Director, Training & Special Projects, American Humane): Effective management of compassion fatigue is crucial to long-term employment and a healthy lifestyle. Organizations that effectively manage compassion fatigue are more likely to decrease turnover, increase adoptions, and reduce euthanasia.

Some Other Useful Resources for Managing Compassion Fatigue:

- Just as you take classes for certification in important skills needed in your professions, it can be important to take an anger management class, assertiveness training, boundary/limit setting class, couples communication class, parenting class (as you feel the need). You may want some professional support for stress, anxiety, depression, loss and grief, anger management, PTSD counseling. Sometimes short-term therapy with a counselor can be very helpful.
- See us at www.petfinder.com/journal/SSACP.html
- Your local Hospice Bereavement Program
- 12 step programs
- International Critical Incident Stress Management Foundation (ICISMF) (Ellicott City, MD)
  410-750-9600 (ask for local teams)
- Institute for Imago Relationship Therapy 1-800-729-1121
- Worldwide Marriage Encounter (and Engaged Encounter) 1-800-795-5683

Some useful websites:

- www.ExternalizationWorkshops.com: 3-day Life, Loss and Healing Workshops and 5-day Workshops for
  People Who Were Abused As Children
- www.groups.yahoo.com/group/euthtechsupport: Internet support group for euthanasia technicians

- www.americanhumane.org: American Humane offers "Managing Compassion Fatigue" 1-day training
  and awareness-building workshops Humane Society University offers training and awareness-
  building workshops
- http://www.animalsheltering.org/resource_library/search_results.html?librarytopic=stress_and_compassion_fatigue
- www.GrowthHouse.org: A Guide to Death, Dying, Grief, Bereavement, and End of Life Care

You are free to print this article to use to support each other in Compassion Fatigue.

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