

Abstract

Compassion Fatigue or Ethics Exhaustion?

In veterinary practice, the diagnosis is critical for proper treatment. Different diseases can cause the same symptoms, and while palliative treatment is sometimes necessary, ideally we want prevention or cure. In this talk, I will speak from the experiential perspective of companion animal general practice about the very real and common problem of compassion fatigue, and why it is different from, and can mask, what I call Ethics Exhaustion. In brief, I define Ethics Exhaustion as the feeling of being powerless to even try to do what you think that you ethically should do, because of the repetitive inability to do so (perhaps an “ethical learned helplessness”?). It can include conflicts in where your primary loyalty lies (yourself, the patient, the client, the profession, etc.). “Right” and “Ethics” are user-defined elements. I am not stating a universal truth nor suggesting that there is a specific right or wrong in any particular case. Examples and circumstances leading to Ethics Exhaustion will be discussed. The source may include finances, bosses, colleagues or co-workers. Treatments for compassion fatigue and burnout may palliate Ethics Exhaustion, but do not address the unique causes. Prevention and treatment should include open dialogue with those involved (individuals or practice team). Having written position statements and protocols are very helpful in fostering this open discussion. The hope is for this dialogue to lead to a place about which all involved can feel good.