

# Compassion Fatigue In Veterinary Practice



Katherine Dobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR



# Goals For Today

- Definitions: Compassion Fatigue & BurnOut
- Transition Phases of Becoming a Helper
- Stressors and Satisfiers in Vet Med
- Predicament of the Vet Manager
- Results from Virbac Survey in Vet Med



# What is Compassion?

*Compassion is a deep awareness of the suffering of another, coupled with the wish to relieve it.*

*Figley & Roop, 2006*



# What is Fatigue?


*Fatigue is the mental weariness resulting from exertion that is associated with attending to the emotional and physical pain of others.*

*Figley & Roop, 2006*



It is believed that [healthcare personnel] should always be:

- at the peak of technical proficiency
- emotionally available
- straightforward
- clear
- and compassionate

A black and white photograph of dandelion seed heads. One seed head is in the foreground, partially cut off by the bottom edge of the frame. Several other seed heads are in the background, some with their seeds blowing away, creating a sense of movement. The background is dark, making the white seed heads stand out.

Robert J. Wicks  
Overcoming Secondary Stress  
in Medical and Nursing Practice

# Are We In Denial?

*Denial is one of the best-developed coping reflexes in health care workers, particularly physicians and nurses [or veterinarians and the medical staff].*

*Anthony Barbato, M.D.*

*Foreword, Overcoming Secondary Stress in Medical and Nursing Practice*



# Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

*Burnout results from stresses that arise from the clinician's interaction with the work environment ...*

*while compassion fatigue evolves specifically from the relationship between the clinician and the patient.*

Kearney et. al., 2009



# Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

- ✧ Burnout is more associated with WHERE you work; if you leave the job, you leave behind the burnout...
- ✧ BUT, Compassion Fatigue is more associated with the work you DO, and it follows you wherever you go...





# How did we get here?

## Five Phases of Transition for a New Helper

- Phase One—The Dream
- Phase Two—The Start
- Phase Three—Losing Our Breath
- Phase Four—Desperately Seeking Rhythm
- Phase Five—Finding Our Rhythm

*Figley & Roop, 2006*

# Phase One—The Dream

- Dream emerges early, perhaps in childhood
- Imagine the good work we will do
- Sustains us through our education
- Eventually we must “wake up”
- Eventually we enter Reality



# Phase Two—The Start

- Starting our careers!
- Ready to make the world a better place!
- We KNOW we can make a difference!
- Our efforts will ease the plight of animals
- Enthusiasm overflows, we live the cause



# Phase Three—Losing Our Breath

- Sinks in that the journey is long
- Enthusiasm dampens
- Resolve begins to diminish
- Discover the difficulties of the job
- Feel mad, angry, perhaps hopeless



# Phase Four—Seeking Rhythm

- Recognize the need to pace ourselves
- Sustain our sanity, health, and energy level
- Slow down, look around, devise a plan
- We will either take steps to move forward...
- ...*Or, we will check out and leave  
profession*



# Phase Five—Finding Rhythm

- Finding our pace, our niche, our way
- Is thrilling and provides a sense of relief
- Hit a stride that carries us through
- We know better what to expect...
- ...*Previous successes to draw from*



# When we find our Rhythm...

*We understand and accept that sadness and pain are a part of our job...We begin to understand that our feelings of anger, depression, and sadness are best dealt with if we recognize them and allow them to wash over and past us...We recognize our incredible potential to help animals.*

*We ARE changing the world!*

*Fakkema, 1991*



# Running The Race

*Just as there is a physical cost of running a marathon, there is an emotional cost in the relationship...with your patients and clients.*

Ogilvie, 2006





# The Survey

- Robert G. Roop, Ph.D.
- Humane Society of the U.S., 2003-2004
- **Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Survey**
- Veterinarians, technicians and assistants,  
office staff and managers
- Stressors and Satisfiers for each



*“And the Survey Says...”*

## Top Three Stressors for Veterinarians

1. Difficult or Noncompliant Clients
2. Not Enough Time
3. Discussing and Disputing Fees



# *More Stressors...*

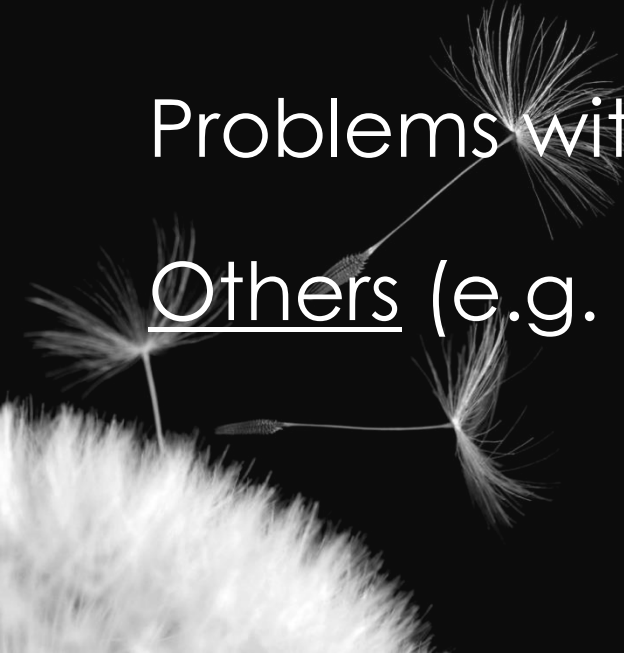
Problems with staff performance

Concern about skills and/or accuracy

Lack of sufficient trained staff

Problems with co-workers

Others (e.g. noise, computer problems, etc.)



*“And the Survey Says...”*

## Top Three Satisfiers for Veterinarians

1. Helping and Healing Animals
2. Thankful Clients
3. Working as a Team



# *More Satisfiers...*

Using skills and learning new ones

Daily contact with animals

Educating clients

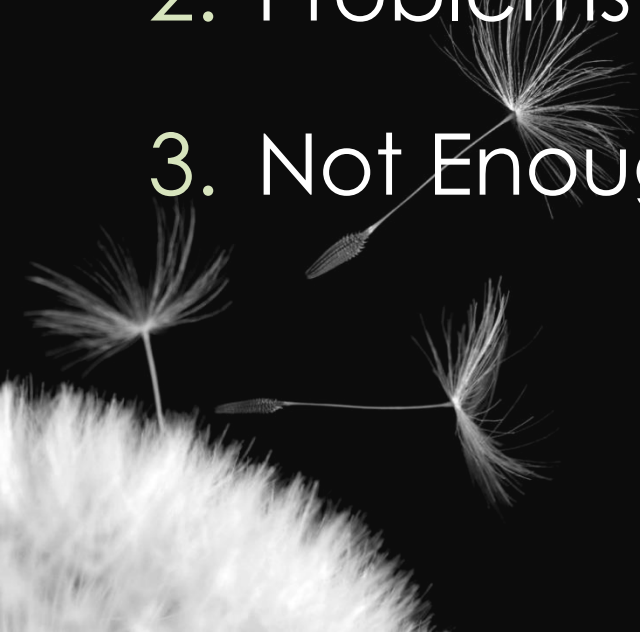
Financial rewards



*“And the Survey Says...”*

## Top Three Stressors for Techs & Assists

1. Difficult or Noncompliant Clients
2. Problems with Co-Workers
3. Not Enough Time



# *More Stressors...*

Performing Euthanasia \*

Very ill or High Risk Patients

Disputes with Supervisor

Lack of Sufficient Trained Staff

Losing a Patient

Fractionous or Dangerous Animals

Other (e.g., noise, computer problems, etc.)

# \* *Performing Euthanasia*

According to the Virbac Survey, just 12% of Vet Techs received euthanasia training at their clinic.





*“And the Survey Says...”*

## Top Three Satisfiers for Techs & Assists

1. Helping and Healing Animals
2. Working as a Team
3. Thankful Clients



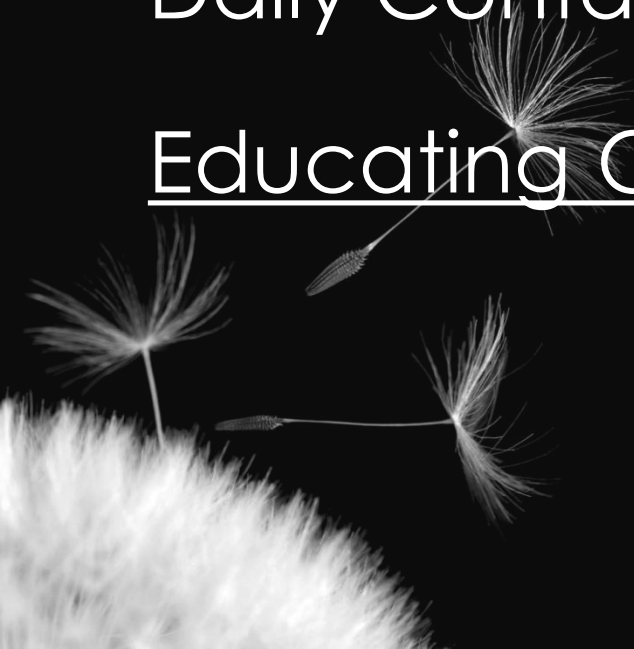
# *More Satisfiers...*

Using Skills

Learning New Skills

Daily Contact with Animals

Educating Clients



*“And the Survey Says...”*

## Top Three Stressors for FO and PM

1. Difficult or Noncompliant Clients
2. Time Demands
3. Disputes Over Fees and Billing



# *More Stressors...*

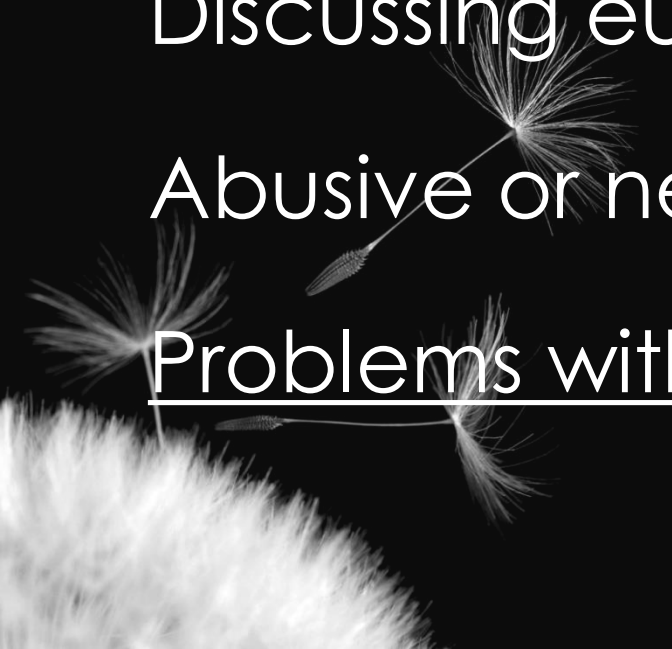
Office stressors (e.g. noise, computer problems, etc.)

Understaffed and staff training

Discussing euthanasia with clients

Abusive or neglectful clients

Problems with supervisors



*“And the Survey Says...”*

Top Three Satisfiers for FO and PM

1. Thankful Clients

2. Daily Contact with Animals

3. Helping and Healing Animals



# *More Satisfiers...*

Working as a team

Using skills and learning new ones

Educating clients



# In the Context of Work...

*Compassion Stress is a function of the general morale and supportiveness of fellow workers, **especially the supervisor and administration.***

*Figley & Roop, 2006*



# *What the Survey Implies...*

## Managers who moved “up”:

1. More contact with Difficult Clients
2. Less contact with Animals
3. “Removed” from the Team

***...suffer from a distinct type of Compassion Fatigue***





# What about Management...

*Administrators have extraordinarily difficult jobs balancing the needs of clients, their staff, and their fiscal limitations and responsibilities.*

*They must witness their staff's struggles and then feel either effective or ineffective in offering support and protection...*

A black and white photograph of dandelion seed heads. One seed head is in the foreground, slightly out of focus, with its seeds blowing away. Another seed head is in the background, also with seeds blowing. The background is dark, making the white seeds stand out.

# More about Management...

*They process [compassion fatigue] exercises on two levels, as individuals and on behalf of the organization and staff as a whole.*

*Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996*



# The Clue to Compassion Fatigue

Experienced repeated situations where the sole responsibility is to care;

Chronic, repeated exposures to situations where listening and empathizing with upset people is required.

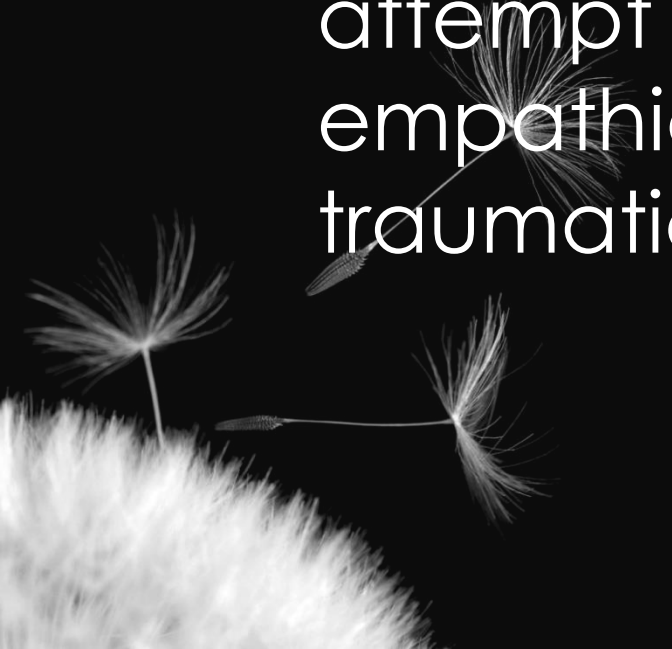
*Ellie Izzo & Vicki Carpel Miller*  
*Second-Hand Shock*



# Also Vicarious Trauma...

Vicarious Trauma is in its own league because it includes compassionate listening, but also includes straining one's brain in an attempt to control the listener's empathic response to the traumatic event.

*Ellie Izzo & Vicki Carpel Miller*  
*Second-Hand Shock*



# What Qualifies as “Trauma”?

- Catastrophic injury
- Life-limited illness
- Suffering
- Death
- Euthanasia
- Where the family is affected by doubt, guilt, uncertainty, and other emotions...

*Controlled empathy is considered a vigorous neurological activity!*

# Virbac Animal Health

*Compassionate Care Online  
Survey and  
Veterinarian Focus Group on  
Compassionate Care &  
Related Issues*



# Exposure To “Trauma” In Vet Med

- Nearly half (47%) of DVMs are having end-of-life care discussions with pet owners more than 11 times per month (31% for Vet Techs).
- Measured from 11 times up to 30 times per month!



# Exposure To “Trauma” In Vet Med

- 59% - 62% of respondents indicate their clinic currently provides end-of-life assistance and training for owners with terminally ill pets.





# Exposure To “Trauma” In Vet Med

- 46% of DVMs report their clinic performs 11 or more euthanasia procedures a month.
- 27% perform more than 15 per month

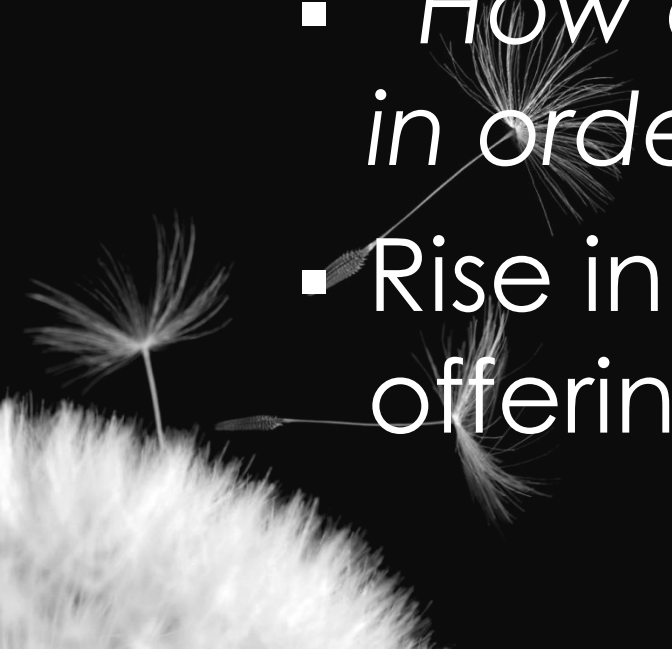


# Exposure To “Trauma” In Vet Med

- All Vet Techs report assisting with euthanasia procedures.
- 87% of Vet Techs indicate the pet owner is most often/always in the room.



# Grief Counseling or Support

- 35% of respondents provide grief counseling/support by the clinic or off-site referral.
  - *“How do we help ourselves, in order to help others?”*
  - Rise in number of practices offering on-site support.
- 

# Rise Of Home Euthanasia

- Home euthanasia option was mentioned 18 times in the survey.
- More DVMs providing solely in-home euthanasia.
- [www.inhomepeteuthanasia.com](http://www.inhomepeteuthanasia.com)



# “Do You Know Compassion Fatigue?”

- Virbac Animal Health survey, April 2010:
  - 77% of veterinarians indicated they are familiar with the term; 64% said that they know the symptoms of this condition
  - 63% of veterinary technicians said that they have heard the term “compassion fatigue”; 55% indicated that they know the symptoms.



# Veterinarians **See** These Symptoms in Clinic:

- 90% - Mentally and physically tired
- 67% - Apathy/Sadness
- 57% - Difficultly concentrating
- 51% - Preoccupation
- 46% - Chronic physical ailments
- 31% - ***Denial of problems\*\*\****
- 31% - Isolation from others
- 24% - Compulsive behaviors
- 18% - Substance abuse to mask feelings
- 15% - Legal problems, indebtedness

# Technicians *Personally Experienced*:

- 66% - Mentally and physically tired
- 43% - Apathy/Sadness
- 31% - Difficultly concentrating
- 31% - Isolation from others
- 30% - **“I’ve experienced NONE of these”**
- 28% - Preoccupation
- 16% - Chronic physical ailments
- 13% - Compulsive behaviors
- 10% - Legal problems, indebtedness
- 8% - Substance abuse to mask feelings
- 7% - **Denial of Problems\*\*\***




# How Are We Coping?

- Majority of veterinarians and technicians were to some degree familiar with CF...
- Yet only 18% of DVMs and 13% of techs indicate that their clinic has strategies in place to cope with compassion fatigue

**Why Not? What Are They?**



## ***Coping Strategies Mentioned in Survey:***

- Discussions, talking openly, sharing feelings
  - Professional counseling when needed/desired
  - Time off, exercise, vacation
  - Socializing, doing things together non job-related
  - Regular staff meetings
  - Raising awareness and education
  - Celebrate happy outcomes for patients
  - Introduce fun/games in the office (humor!)
  - Reduce [trauma] frequency, rotate staff members
  - Peer identification
- 

# Three-Pronged Approach

*...over the last decade there has been an increasing awareness of the need to develop ways to “care for our careers”.*

*With this, is a growing recognition of the necessity for a three-pronged approach to managing occupational stress.*

*Firstly, an organizational responsibility to care for staff, secondly, an obligation amongst peers to support colleagues, and thirdly, a personal responsibility to care for oneself.*

*Huggard and Huggard, 2008*

# Relationship-Based Care

*...comprised of (a) the carer's relationship with patients and their loved ones,*

*(b) the carer's relationship to self, and*

*(c) the carer's relationship with coworkers*

*Todaro-Franceschi, 2013*

*Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in Nursing*





Thank You

[www.katherinedobbs.com](http://www.katherinedobbs.com)

[www.veterinarycompassionfatigue.com](http://www.veterinarycompassionfatigue.com)