Compassion Fatigue or Ethics Exhaustion?

Sonnya Dennis, DVM, DABVP
Who I Am

- Full-time private practice DVM (and owner) > 15 years
  - AAHA-accredited hospital
  - Diplomate American Board of Veterinary Practitioners
- Director on the Board at the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)
- Euthanasia Guidelines Committee, AAHA
- Electronic Health Records Taskforce, AAHA
Who I am NOT

- I am NOT ...
  - an armchair social worker
  - A Monday-morning psychologist
- Because...
  - My social work and psychology training and knowledge is nil.
  - I have too much respect for those professions to dabble.
  - (Therefore, please excuse any mangling of the profession that I may do during this talk.)
  - I am speaking from my experience as a veterinarian in private practice.

"I know that I know nothing" – Socrates
Why This Topic?

Seeing and reading a lot about Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in veterinary journals, but...

Doesn’t quite encompass something else, something additional, that I see in practice.
Why Words Matter

• “Gee, doc, my dog is peeing a lot”...
  • Diabetes
  • Adrenal Disease
  • Too many Jack and Cokes?

• “Gee, doc, I’m feeling blue”...
  • Depression
  • Compassion Fatigue
  • Brain tumor?

the long way of saying that different diseases need different treatment
Definitions
(as my veterinary brain can understand them)

- Burnout
- Compassion Fatigue
- Ethics Exhaustion
Burnout

- Termination of rocket operation because of fuel exhaustion

- Physical or Emotional exhaustion caused by and leading to
  - long-term stress
  - low job satisfaction
  - feelings of powerlessness
Compassion Fatigue
Fatigue, Emotional Distress, or Apathy

- Leading to:
  - Tired or Hopeless
  - Decrease in experiences of pleasure
  - Constant stress and anxiety
  - Jaded or pervasive negative attitude
  - Gradual lessening of compassion over time

Caused by:
- Constant demands of caring for others
- Constant appeals for charitable donations
Ethics Exhaustion?

My own term for...

Fatigue, emotional distress, and lack of will to continue to act in a way that is consistent with what you believe is the ethical thing to do.

Having failed to square behavior with belief so often that you no longer care to try.
Ethics, as used here, is

- a code of moral conduct or rules
- following duty, not convenience
- not alterable by circumstance
- a sense of duty, right or wrong
- doing the thing that I should do
Ethics, to be clear, is

- “user-defined”
- It’s personal.
- I am not stating a universal truth.
Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others
Ethics Exhaustion is

NOT a loss of compassion,

but being prevented from acting on

what you believe is

the compassionate, caring thing to do.
Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others
- having trouble defining what that right thing is
Ethics Exhaustion

How do I prioritize my ethical duty?

Human Client vs. Pet Patient vs. Boss vs. Profession vs. Family vs. Self
Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others
- having trouble defining what that right thing is
- a mismatch between your ethical belief and your actual behavior
Ethics Exhaustion

A Mismatch in Belief and Behavior

I feel that I must do this action,

Behavioral drift...

even if it isn’t the right thing to do.
Behavioral Drift

Did you change your beliefs or just give in?

*It is one thing to actually change what you believe to be ethical, yet another thing entirely, to believe one thing, but to do another.
Behavioral Drift

“convenience” euthanasia as an example

- End-Stage Heart Failure, non-responsive to treatment
- Severe Periodontal disease / pain and cannot afford treatment
- Arthritis and owner does not want to medicate daily
- De-claw vs. euthanize 10 year old cat
- Owner died and put in will for family to euthanize the healthy 4 year old dog
- Moving and no longer wants healthy 4 year old dog
- Old black cat, New white furniture
Ethics Exhaustion

as it relates to Cognitive Dissonance

• **Problem:**
  • My behaviors are incongruous with my beliefs

• **Action:** lie to self, suppress feelings
Ethics Exhaustion

Result:

DENIAL as a coping mechanism
Ethics Exhaustion
as it relates to Learned Helplessness

I’ve never been strong enough
to break this
big, tough twig.

Seligman and Maier, 1965
Ethics Exhaustion

“Ethical Learned Helplessness”

- Too exhausted to continue to do what we believe is right.
- No one else cares, why should I?
- Might as well do it because someone will...
- Not my fault; I had no choice.
- Just following orders...
Ethics Exhaustion

as it relates to

Obedience to Authority

“...often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act."

–Stanley Milgram, 1974
Ethics Exhaustion

The Source

- a boss insisting that you crop ears
  - What if I lose my job?
- a colleague who no longer caps, masks and gowns for surgeries
  - What if I lose my friend?
- financial pressure to do it all for (almost) free
  - How do I practice good medicine with no money?
- Being asked to euthanize a pet with a treatable illness
  - What if I lose my client?

Human-Animal Bond affects YOU more than the pet’s owner
Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary Ear Cropping

Unrestricted
- Afghanistan, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Egypt, Indonesia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco
- Mauritius, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, & US

Banned
- Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain (Barcelona and Andalusia), Sweden, Switzerland, Virgin Islands, Wales
Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary

Does it matter what we call it?

Euthanasia
- pain, distress or suffering exceeds manageable levels
- health or welfare of animals is irredeemably compromised

Humane Killing
- research animals at the end of studies
- Strays
- unwanted pets that cannot be rehomed
- slaughter of livestock
Ethics Exhaustion

Practical Consequences

The Profession
- Poor job performance
e disastrous in the medical field
- High turnover

Inter-Personal Relationships
- Lack of camaraderie
- Withdrawal

Personal Issues
- Stress, Depression, Frustration, Anger
- Loss of Respect for Self/Low self esteem
  - Not a nice person
- Loss of respect from others
  - Not a “good” vet
- (fear of becoming the vet that as a new grad, I swore I would never become)
Ethics Exhaustion
Treatment
Same as Compassion Fatigue and Burnout?

Can you change your environment?
Change jobs?
Change profession?
Seek help?

Does this work with Ethics Exhaustion?

Or is there more to it?
Treatment for Ethics Exhaustion starts with recognizing that there is a problem.
Ethics Exhaustion

What are we looking for?

Resolution!

Absolution?
Ethics Exhaustion

Treatment

No more behavioral drift...
What else can we do?

If you can’t vaccinate yourself against Ethics Exhaustion,

maybe you can put on a little armor.

- Don’t take the guilt of a decision all onto yourself.
- State concerns and perform under protest
- Be honest, be sincere, but not angry (remember, ethics are personal...)
- Seek help or unite.
Our ethics are our own

- And if we speak up frequently enough, we may
  - Get our way
  - Change the world
  - Get fired
    - Or Lose clients, which is the practice owner equivalent

...maybe Win - Win?
Ethics Exhaustion

Goals?

- These topics must not be taboo!
- Get to a better place through dialogue and idea EXCHANGE!!
- Be a team!!!
Ethics Exhaustion

Prevention

- **Employees**
  - Prior to interviewing for a position
    - Write down your hot-button issues
    - Ask yourself where you are truly NOT comfortable compromising
    - Ask the interviewer what the policy at the hospital is. (Are they open to discussion?)
Ethics Exhaustion

Prevention

- Bosses and Supervisors
  - Recognize the power of Obedience to Authority
  - Create a safe environment to discuss these conflicts
  - Recognize that ordering an employee to do something he feels is unethical will actually lead to worse job performance
  - Have written policy
Committed to Ethical Guidelines is every bit as important as our other Standard Operating Procedures

- Surgery
- Anesthesia
- Pain Management
- Euthanasia
- Firing a client

- Everything that ever went less well than we would have liked! (It is like having morbidity and mortality rounds for ethics.)
Ethics Exhaustion

- Leadership
  - Standards of Care
  - Guidelines
  - Position Statements
- Support
  - Camaraderie with TEAMS who have similar values
  - My Veterinary Career
- Education
  - High Quality
  - Availability & Flexibility
  - Veterinary & Life
Correct diagnosis is critical for proper treatment.
- Different diseases may have same symptoms.
- Palliative is good, cure is better, prevention is best!
- Ethics Exhaustion may be comorbid with Compassion Fatigue.

*Ethics Exhaustion is fatigue, emotional distress, and lack of will to continue to act in a way that is consistent with what you believe is the ethical thing to do. It is having failed to square behavior with belief so often that you no longer care to try.* Ethical Learned Helplessness.
Ethics Exhaustion

• Sources: finances, bosses, colleagues, co-workers, et al.
• Treatments for compassion fatigue may palliate Ethics Exhaustion, but may not treat or prevent unique causes.
• Prevention and treatment include: having open dialogue (no taboo topics) with individuals or teams, having written position statements and SOPs, being part of the greater good.
• Tilting at windmills? No. We too easily look at idealistic, new graduates and quash those ideals that we, ourselves, used to hold as truths.
• Goal: healthier profession, healthier caretakers, healthier pets
Ethics Exhaustion

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

– Dylan Thomas

Thank you for listening.

Questions? Concerns?