

**3<sup>rd</sup> International Veterinary Social Work Summit**  
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# **Compassion Fatigue or Ethics Exhaustion?**

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# 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

- Leads to



- Caused by

- continuous demands of caring
- emotional toll
- constant appeals for help
- loss of compassion





# 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

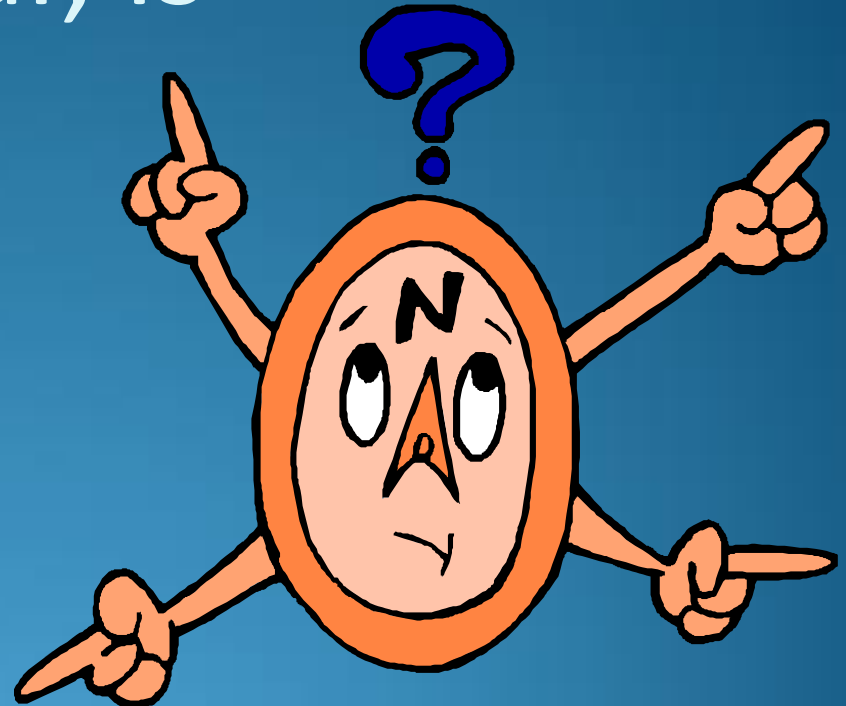


*Socrates*

- 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

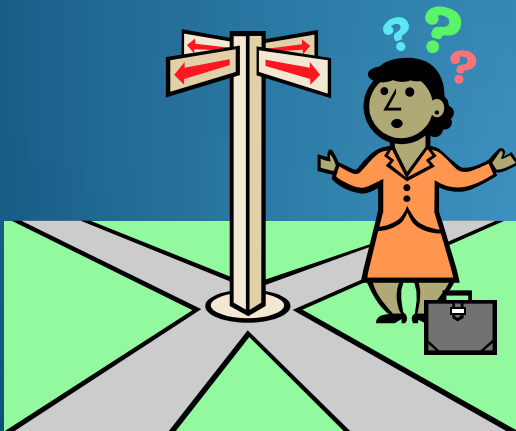
vs. Pet Patient

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:

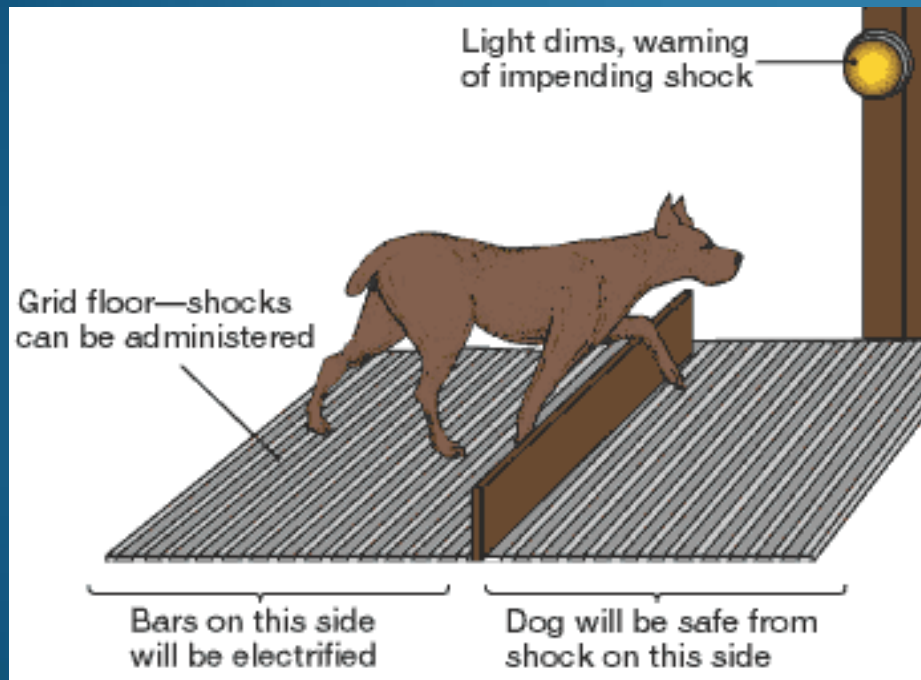
**DENIAL**

as a coping mechanism

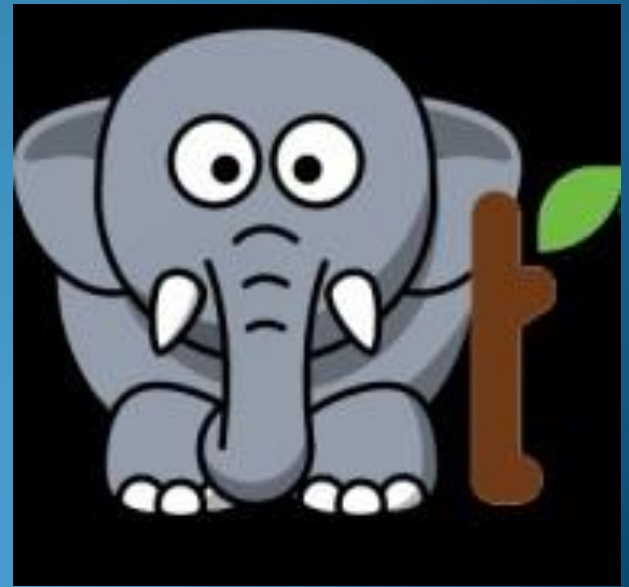


# Ethics Exhaustion

## 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."*

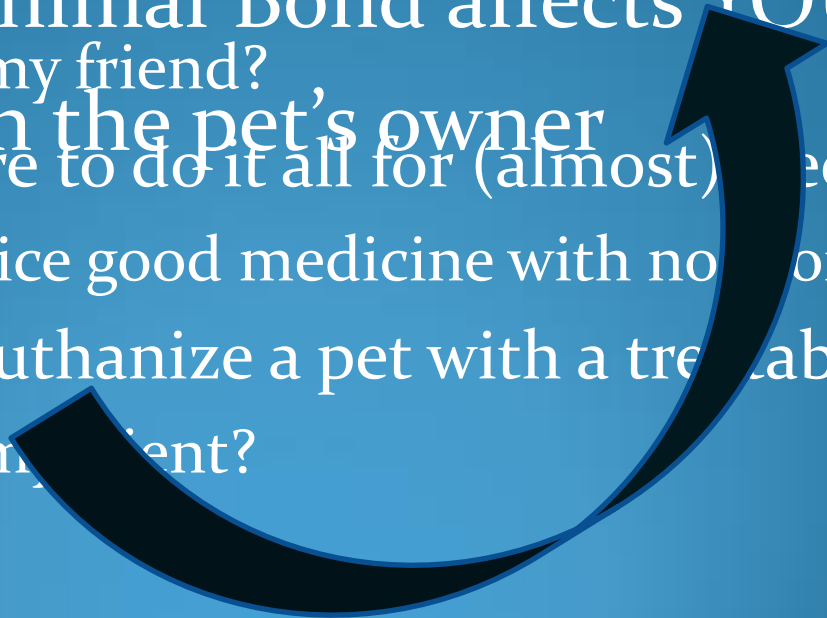
–Stanley Milgram, 1974



# 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
- Human-Animal Bond affects YOU more than the pet's owner
  - 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 patient?



# Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary

## Ear Cropping

Unrestricted

Banned

Afghanistan,  
Argentina,  
Bolivia, Chile,  
Egypt,  
Indonesia,  
Kuwait,  
Lebanon,  
Malaysia,  
Morocco

Mauritius,  
Mexico,  
Nepal, Peru,  
Philippines,  
Sri Lanka,  
Taiwan, &  
US

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

Humane  
Killing

pain, distress or suffering  
exceeds manageable levels

health or welfare of animals is  
irredeemably compromised

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
  - 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?

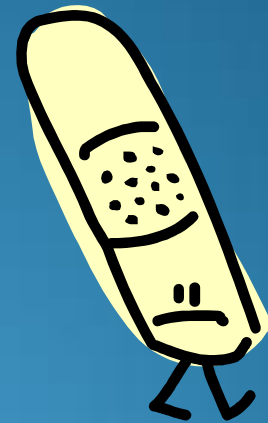
Can you change your environment?

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

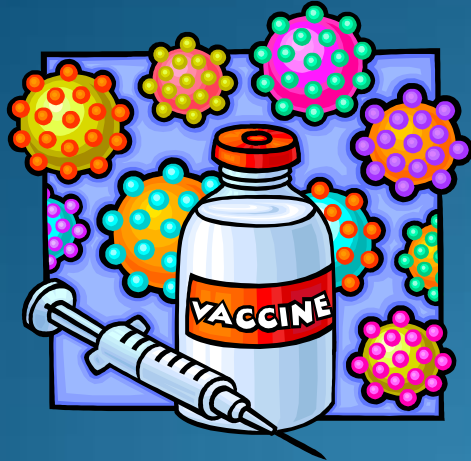
Treatment

No more behavioral drift...





# What else can we do?



maybe you can put on a little armor.

If you can't vaccinate yourself against Ethics Exhaustion,



- 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.

# Ethics Exhaustion

Our ethics are our own

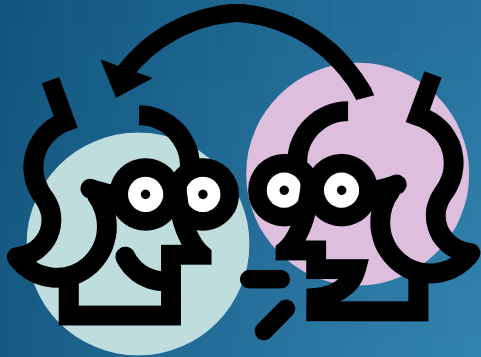
- And if we speak up frequently enough, we may
  - Get our way
  - Change the world
  - Get fired
    - Or Lose clients, which is the practice owner equivalent

...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

# Ethics Exhaustion

## (An Ounce of) Prevention

Committing to Ethical Guidelines is every bit as important as our other **Standard Operating Procedures**

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

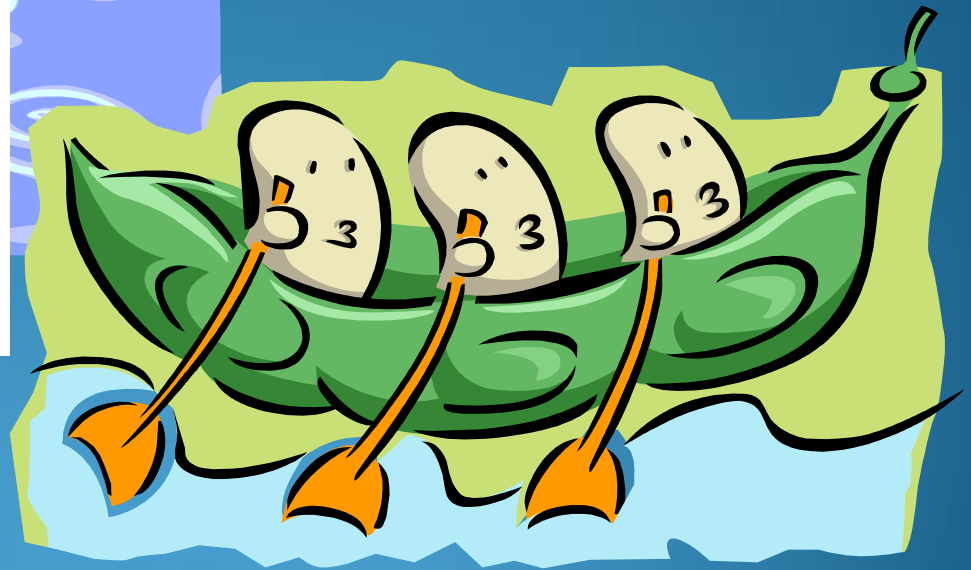


- Everything that ever went less well than we would have liked!  
(It is like having morbidity and mortality rounds for ethics.)

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The Standard of  
Veterinary Excellence



# 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



# Ethics Exhaustion

- 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?