

# Burnout And Compassion Fatigue: What Vet Professionals Need To Know

Having recently read a young girl's letter entitled 'My Dream Job' provides a good illustration of some of the underlying reasons for compassion fatigue in the veterinary industry. Her dream job is full of recognition and love where she can treat sick animals that she can't bear to see suffer; where she can alleviate their illness with her own two hands, and where her job is her calling. Fast forward and this girl will be met with reactions such as "You are a vet? What a beautiful profession, I also wanted to be a vet." Yet behind the curtain she will be one of 74% of veterinarians who are stressed and burnout if she works in the UK (BVA, 2020), and one of 50.2% feeling burnout or one of 58.9% feeling compassion fatigue if she works in the US (Ouedraogo *et al.*, 2021).

Being a veterinary professional is one of the most fulfilling occupations. However, it comes with a lot of hardship which needs to be managed otherwise we find ourselves in a downward spiral. Not only is burnout dangerous for the individual, but it is also detrimental for the veterinary business and the whole profession. A recent study from the Cornell Centre for Veterinary Business and Entrepreneurship has found that workplace burnout is costing the veterinary industry \$2 billion annually in the US (Neill *et al.*, 2022). While it's not all about the money of course, putting this very human issue into financial terms may make it more tangible for some. This high burnout rate is followed by difficulties of retaining and recruiting veterinary professionals into clinical practice, with 43.7% of vets in the UK actively thinking about leaving their

employment (Hagen *et al.*, 2020). The most frequent reason, at 41.2%, for wanting to leave is due to poor work-life integration.

## What Does Work-life Integration Have to Do with Burnout?

Work-life balance or work-life integration is typically defined as a state of well-being that can be maintained through effective management of multiple work and non-work related responsibilities, and with minimal stress related outcomes (Figure 1). In the Cornell study mentioned above, they defined burnout according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a syndrome "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed". While reasons for any outcome are often multifactorial and there is no one best linear solution to a problem, we could sum-up that to aid retention of happy and fulfilled vets in clinical practice, we need to primarily improve their work-life integration, which largely means avoiding stress related outcomes that may lead to burnout in the long run.

## Compassion Fatigue – A Type of Burnout

Burnout can be classified into three types:

1. **Overload burnout**, where the person works harder than ever to the point of risking their health, feels obligated to work at an unsustainable pace, and often results in physical and mental exhaustion
2. **Under-challenge burnout**, where the person loses passion and joy for their work, is not being stimulated by the job, and is often accompanied by feelings of boredom and lack of learning opportunities by doing too little



Figure 1

3. **Neglect burnout**, where the person loses a sense of purpose, finds it hard to stay engaged and is unable to keep up with the demands because they feel helpless in the case of challenge

Compassion fatigue is a form of overload burnout, but the two terms are not interchangeable. While vets suffering from burnout become physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted due to work-related stressors, vets with compassion fatigue continue to give themselves to the job despite their emotional exhaustion and the resulting inability to continue to empathise. Compassion fatigue usually follows on from burnout and secondary trauma. The physical symptom of both are similar, for example, disturbed sleeping patterns, changes in appetite, and feelings of sickness. Emotionally, during a burnout a person can feel helpless, demotivated, dissatisfied, and detached from work, while a person experiencing compassion fatigue will primarily lose the ability to empathise and the ability to separate personal and professional life.

### Why Do Vets Get Compassion Fatigue?

As the little girl's letter at the beginning of this article demonstrates, the veterinary profession attracts individuals who are highly compassionate and caring. Veterinarians find a sense of satisfaction in helping and caring for others. This is both a blessing and a curse. While caregiving is a positive and a desirable trait, repeated exposure to negative and traumatic events, such as euthanasia and disease, can lead to compassion fatigue. In fact, compassion fatigue is often known as "secondary traumatic stress". As two psychology scholars put it, "exposure to patients to clients experiencing trauma or distress can negatively impact professional's mental and physical health, safety and wellbeing...[and] can impact standards of patient care, relationships with colleagues, or lead to more serious mental health conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression" (Cocker and Joss, 2016).

### How to Prevent and Recover from Compassion Fatigue?

Time – a friend or a foe? Time, or the lack of it, is the enemy for those who are experiencing compassion fatigue. To compensate for the lack of time, vets would eat their lunch while writing up their notes, or skip lunch altogether to phone their clients, or skip taking a break to check on inpatients. They skip on the very thing that would help them the most to recharge and continue productively – a break, exercise, non-work activities, or time with friends. Self-care practices are key to managing compassion fatigue. Investing in taking care of yourself will contribute to building resilience on all levels – behavioural, emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive. The following are commonly stated areas to focus on:

- **Connect** with your co-workers and colleagues to support each other and remind yourself that you are not alone
- **Build resilience** through adequate sleep, healthy nutrition, physical exercise, and active relaxation
- **Take time off** for self-reflection and to build self-awareness, to identify what is important to you, and to engage in some self-care activities
- **Create your own 'work principles'**, guidelines of personal integrity that can help you stay within the parameters of your personal values, then live and work within these principles

Commonly, veterinary professionals start with 'compassion satisfaction' (as we can see in the young girl's letter) and overtime and due to various personal and organisational pressures it turns into 'compassion fatigue'. Compassion satisfaction is the pleasure and feeling of fulfilment a person

feels when helping others. The good news is, it can be developed intentionally and can then act as a preventative measure for compassion fatigue. In human nurse research, factors that influence a nurse's level of compassion satisfaction include work hours per shift, team dynamics, physical exercise and healthy food facilities at workplace, quality of social support and professional counselling, and longer duration in current position (Jarrad and Hammad, 2020).

### How Can the Workplace Minimise the Likelihood of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue?

Burnout, such as compassion fatigue, affects not only the individual in terms of job satisfaction and health but also the workplace. The workplace may suffer from decreased productivity, quality of work, client satisfaction and increased staff turnover, all of which result in increased financial burden for the business as stated earlier. How to prevent burnout at a workplace can be largely classified into the following three subheadings:

#### Leadership Behaviour

- Relationship-orientated leadership behaviour
- Effective leaders that promote a culture of caring
- Recognition and reward system
- Feedback and debriefing
- Effective management training to provide efficient support

#### Workplace Technicalities

- Appropriate staffing
- Professional development
- Flexible working opportunities
- Monitoring of workload and schedules
- Clarity of job role and responsibilities

#### Psychological Conditions

- Effective communication, teamwork, equality
- Psychological safety
- Eliminating mistrust and blame culture
- Promoting autonomy and fairness
- Promoting work-life integration and work boundaries

The above list is only a brief outline, it is not exhaustive, and different clinics will need to focus on different areas. However, a good starting point is to be proactive. It is noteworthy that, despite being common, compassion fatigue is only one type of burnout, therefore it is useful to be aware of some of the other reasons for burnout and direct attention to the appropriate mitigation and prevention strategies necessary in your workplace. There are numerous studies that highlight the effect of workload on the mental wellbeing of veterinarians. These studies state working hours and ethical dilemmas as the major stressors in a veterinary workplace; with others including financial strain and client demands (Pohl *et al.*, 2022). Whatever the reasons, both, developing personal coping strategies and organisational support are important to help create a burnout-free culture and help cope with work-related stress.

While quite a bleak picture of the veterinary profession was painted here, they are not alone in suffering from burnout. According to the Microsoft's 2021 Work Trend Index, over half of the world's workforce is overworked. Depending on the source, health and patient care professionals are typically quoted within the top three industries with the highest burnout rates, accompanied by the hospitality and manufacturing industries. Whatever the profession, ignoring



employee burnout is a risky business, and with the level of burnout in the veterinary profession, it's better to be prepared than needing to put out fires. We can all relate to the age old saying: "prevention is better than cure". Here too, prevention of burnout by having a proactive mindset and strong business acumen is a good first steppingstone.

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