



Euthanasia Related Stress and Compassion Fatigue

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Compassion Fatigue

- **How do you know if you are suffering from Compassion Fatigue?**
 - Feeling that your work is not making a difference
 - Anxiety or fear when thinking about events at work (including “flash backs” and nightmares)
 - Guilt for not doing enough
 - Anger or rage toward those who create your work
 - Shutdown or “numbness” due to exhaustion from work (don’t care any more)
 - Hypersensitivity – reacting emotionally with little provocation (e.g., crying easily)



Compassion Fatigue

- **How do you know if you are suffering from Compassion Fatigue?**
 - Forgetfulness
 - Nervous behaviors
 - Teeth grinding
 - nail biting
 - twitches



Compassion Fatigue

- **How do you know if you are suffering from Compassion Fatigue?**
 - Panic attacks
 - Clinical Depression
 - Inability to concentrate
 - Insomnia (inability to sleep even when tired)
 - Loss of or increased appetite
 - Extreme sadness, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness
 - Thoughts of death

Compassion Fatigue

- **How do you know if you are suffering from Compassion Fatigue?**
 - Emotional rollercoaster
 - Hypersensitive and sad one moment
 - Angry and hyperactive the next
 - Overwhelmed by work
 - Reaching personal limits in time, patience, and sensitivity to others
 - Depleted by work
 - Exhaustion makes it difficult to have a normal life outside work





Compassion Fatigue

- **CF has low association with Euthanasia but high association with killing**
 - Those who euthanize dying patients rarely feel conflicted about it
 - Animal Care workers who have no choice but to kill healthy animals often face personal repercussions
 - **KILLING-CARING PARADOX:** Those who care the most and do the best job are precisely those who are most likely to be hurt by their work and suffer from CF
 - Those who care for animals and bond with them are asked to kill them when they have nowhere to go
- Social service workers have low control over outcome as well, but killing is not part of the solutions offered in human services



Compassion Fatigue - Coping

- **Health concerns:** Exercise and nutrition are key management techniques that are overlooked in high stress workers.
- **Skill leads to confidence:** confidence reduces Stress
- **Support Networks:** A variety of supports are needed to meet the needs of diverse workforce to prevent substance abuse, risk taking behavior and health risks due to stress



Coping with CF

- Recognize the source of your stress
 - Watching animals die
 - Sheer numbers of euthanasia
 - Attachment to shelter animals
 - Feeling personally responsible for every death because:
 - you are the one pushing the plunger to produce death
 - you are choosing those who dies
 - you cannot find the animal a home
 - You cannot provide every animal with a good life and health while at the shelter
 - Other reasons



Coping with CF

- Talk with someone who has knowledge and experience with euthanasia
 - Friends and family may have no ability to empathize with what you do, and may not be the source of support that you most need
 - “I love animals so much that I could never do what you do”
 - What does that make you??
 - Turn to your workplace for help



Coping with CF

Natalie Sagely, 2007:

“I always tell people when they ask me how I can do it (perform euthanasia) that I would rather it be me. I would rather be the one to hurt every day and to suffer because of euthanasia of an animal rather than risk the animal dying by unfriendly hands or cruelty. I sacrifice for them because I love them, and I would rather it be me doing euthanasia because at least then I know they went as peacefully and humanely as I am humanly capable of providing. And that my friends I believe is the Gods honest truth for most all of us who perform this painful task.”



Coping with CF

- Keep a journal
 - Some don't really like to discuss the problems
- Prevent detachment from becoming extreme
 - Beware if you find yourself not caring at all about the shelter animals
- Prevent attachment from becoming extreme
 - Avoid adopting too many animals
 - Make sure they are better off than where they came from
 - Take a break when you find the emotion of dealing with losing your favorites is too much



Coping with CF

- Reflect on the successes
 - Successful adoptions
 - Successful reclaims
 - Public education
 - Owner assistance
- Be skilled at euthanasia
 - Be tactfully assertive about the way you want to do your work
 - Hold the way you want to hold
 - Opt out when you need to



Coping with CF

- Maintain balance in your life
 - Physical, spiritual, family, rest
 - Different people thrive in different sorts of balance
- Keep things in perspective
 - Don't give \$10 worth of stress to a 10 cent situation
 - Genuinely positive thinking is powerful, and infectious
- If all else fails, seek out professional help with a counselor who understands the issues of euthanasia and shelter work
 - Do it before the stress is overwhelming



Coping with CF

- Remember that there are times when worse things than death can happen
- Remind yourself that crying can be a healthy physical release of stress
 - The occasional good cry does wonders
 - If you find yourself crying every day, deal with the problem, whatever it is – it needs more than a good cry
- PTSD – Post traumatic Stress Disorder
- PISD - Perpetration Induced Stress Disorder
- JAVMA Coping Mechanisms Study



Coping with CF

- Things the shelter can do:
 - Provide dedicated euthanasia room
 - Allow as much time as is necessary to perform the euthanasias – tailor to each euth tech
 - Allow opting out on a particular case or for a time, upon request
 - Rotate euth techs and train as many as possible to lighten the load
 - Provide proper training
 - Provide support – informal and formal
 - Question euthanasia decisions only through formal channels



Coping with CF

- Scientific Studies (web resources)
- Higher employee turnover if:
 - Higher euthanasia rate
 - No designated euthanasia room
 - live animals not excluded from vicinity during euthanasia
 - euthanasia of animals for other than behavior and health reasons
 - No standardized testing of employees



Coping with CF

- Scientific Studies
- ACOs who perform euthanasia at increased at risk for:
 - Work-family conflict
 - Lack of job satisfaction
 - High blood pressure
 - Ulcers
 - Unresolved grief
 - Depression
 - Substance abuse
 - Suicide



Coping with CF

- Scientific Studies
- turning-point events that spurred a negative change in psychological well-being
 - First euthanasia experience
 - Difficult euthanasia
 - Increased animal intake
 - Euthanasia of healthy animals
 - Negative interactions with management



Coping with CF

- Scientific Studies
- turning-point events that spurred a positive change in psychological well-being
 - Positive interactions with management
 - Euthanasia training
 - Reduced number of euthanasias at shelter
 - Reduced number of euthanasias by the person
 - Improved euthanasia method
 - Coping support system at work



Support

- Don't underestimate the toll euthanasia takes on shelter workers
- Communication through regular staff meetings with those involved with euthanasia
 - Be proactive about uncovering problems early
 - Don't wait until problem is severe enough for someone to complain
 - Meetings can also serve as a support group
- Mentor system
 - Pair new providers with experienced providers who seem to cope well with responsibilities of euthanasia
- Rotation
 - Everyone should have periodic time off from euthanasia duties

Support

- Opt Out
 - Employees should be given regular opportunities to opt out from euthanasia responsibilities, temporarily or permanently
- Debriefing
 - Held when employee opts out
 - Identify shelter management problems
 - Evaluate need for further support of the employee
- Grievance process
 - Employees must be aware of how to voice formal and informal complaints



Preventing CF

- Ask applicants how they feel about euthanasia
- Make sure the euthanasia room is included in the initial tour for newcomers
 - Observe their response
- But remember that the full weight of euthanasia will not be fully understood until they participate
- Give newcomers plenty of time to observe and learn, only moving ahead to performing euthanasia when they are ready





Preventing CF

- Rotate euth techs to other duties from time to time
 - Like nurses who rotate out of ICU
- Have as many people as possible at the shelter certified to perform euthanasia
 - Makes taking euthanasia sabbaticals or opting out less of an issue



Preventing CF

- Experience holding prior to moving on to injecting
- Pair new techs with experienced techs
- Allow euth techs to participate in the euthanasia selection process
- Euthanasia is stressful, and more anger at those who surrender animals right after a session is normal
 - Maybe not a good time to immediately go work in the surrender room, or even in reception

The Blame Game

- Try to hit the sweet spot
- Don't accept the blame for failing to single handedly solve a community problem
 - There is only so much that you can do, in a limited period of time – set reasonable goals
- On the other hand... Don't use that as an excuse to fail to respond to opportunities to improve the effectiveness of your shelter in solving the pet excess problem
 - Track numbers – intakes and outcomes
 - Institute programs to ensure yearly progress
 - Celebrate progress, don't accept lack of progress ([Nac Chart](#))

