



# 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](#))