

BETTERINARY CARE – Caring About the Care-Givers

Welcome to this discussion on Empathetic Exhaustion. Why SOS? The essence of WHAT we do is to care for our patients and their owners. In doing so, we very often forgo our own care. This leads us down the path of EE – the cost of caring paid by the caregiver. And what price do we pay? For some, it is a very high price to be paid. This talk is focused on the care of the caregiver – Saving Ourselves so that We Can Save Others.

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water without getting wet. This sort of denial is no small matter. The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life. We burn out not because we don’t care but because we don’t grieve. We burn out because we’ve allowed our hearts to become so filled with loss that we have no room left to care.”

We care a great deal – that is why we are in this profession. The problem is that we do NOT grieve. We do not acknowledge our feelings in the moment. We go from appt to appt to appt every day. All the negative, sad, difficult emotions/interactions from each appointment are held onto – “I will deal with that later.” They become *our* negative emotions. That is why we burn out – because our hearts become so filled with loss/stress/anxiety/fear, that we have no room left to care about anything. This is Empathetic Exhaustion.

This can affect anyone within the profession - *“All of us who attempt to heal the wounds of others will ourselves be wounded; it is, after all, inherent in the relationship.”* To care for someone in pain requires you to be vulnerable, to walk through that water and get wet. We have to be careful not to drown though in the suffering of others.

Why then do we do this? Do you ask yourself that question? You need to be able to answer that question – I do this because Knowing your meaning and purpose in life is the single most predictive factor in Well-being. WHAT IS YOUR WHY?

One of the reasons why and one of the reasons that we have this profession is the Human Animal Bond. That mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals. We have a very important role in this bond – to nurture it, protect it, maximize it and respect it. We have responsibility to care for both sides of this – the pet and the human. We are a people profession. That makes it special and makes it difficult – in respecting the bond, we must advocate for the pet knowing that will be bringing sorrow to the human side. Personally, we each experience this bond with our own pets as well.

Navigating all of this can be difficult. We are going to look at how we navigate these oceans of emotion (ours and others) and the waters that “walk through” daily. How do we prepare for this journey? What skills and resources do we need to successfully and safely make it through?

What are the waves (frustrations) that drive you crazy and mess up your world. What are the ripple effects of these frustrations – for you and for your team?_____

What are the Joys/Life-preservers that keep you afloat? Why do you do this?_____

Empathy. Empathy is at the core of who we are as care-givers. Empathy is the capacity to see things from another’s point of view and feel what that person is feeling.¹ It is both innate and learned. This applies to both about positive and negative feelings. Unfortunately, due to our negativity bias, the brain/amygdala is always looking for the negative and latching on to it.

Once empathy is established, that leads to Compassion.

COMPASSION is the Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the desire to relieve it. It is both emotion and action. It is being present in an energetic way for someone who is hurt or suffering.

Compassion Fatigue/Empathetic Exhaustion is defined as The Cost of Caring. The price paid for by the Caregiver. A price that we pay for with our emotional, physical and psychological health and sometimes, the ultimate price, our life. Why are we so willing to pay too much to do what we want to do?

The components of Empathetic Exhaustion are Burnout plus Traumatic Stress (primary and secondary).

Burnout.

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance from one's job
3. Feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job

To avoid burnout!:

Work with purpose.

Perform a job analysis and eliminate or delegate unnecessary work.

Give to others.

Take control, and actively manage your time.

Get more exercise.

Learn how to manage stress.

Traumatic Stress is more a factor for us. The resulting clinical signs from both look the same. It is the causes that are different. Primary – a trauma, injury, challenge occurs to you. Secondary – you witness/hear about the trauma (the drama of the trauma). This is what we encounter every day with patients and clients. You witness their pain, fear, anxiety, stress, regret, and anger.

We are “infected” with this Secondary Traumatic Stress. It begins with Empathy - seeing and hearing what our patients /clients are experiencing. Our brain’s tendency to seek out and find the bad leads to focus on negative emotions and activation of SNS - fight/flight reaction. As this SNS activation goes on and on, we become fueled by cortisol. This will be significant later.

Allostatic Load

Psychological Inflammation

Who is at risk for this. Anyone at the hospital is at risk. Everyone is exposed to the traumatic stress of patients and clients. Knowing you are at risk is important. This knowledge allows you to do something about it. We address risk factors for disease in our patients everyday so that we can minimize the effect that they have. The same is true for ourselves and empathetic exhaustion.

Risk Factors: _____

Empathy and Compassion are at the core of our ability to do the work and to be wounded by the work.

Empathy is our Superpower but it can become my Kryptonite.

Double-edged sword of empathy THIS IS THE MAIN POINT OF WHOLE TALK!

Empathy is an innate response that allows us to connect with others. Not everyone has the same type or level of empathetic response though.

Those of us that go into care-giving fields have higher levels of empathy. We fight to save others. It is our gift. It allows us to share emotional empathy and empathic concern with those we are taking care of.

However, without managing & protecting our own feelings (self-awareness & self-care), we give away our empathy and we take on the pain of others as our own – thus we end up falling on our own sword and being injured by our own good intentions. Cost of Caring

How often do you willingly fall on your “sword” in the name of caring for others? And we wonder why we are so tired, weak, angry and hurt all the time.

The cost of caring has a high price for those that don’t put value on their own lives.

Clinical Signs.

Diagnosis – ProQOL

The Infection of Secondary Traumatic Stress.

The sympathetic nervous system is allowed to take over and infect you

No boundaries

Your days are full of “perceived” threats.

Your patients’ traumas become encoded into your memory/being = mirror neurons

Your resiliency is eroded; become more reactive, fatigued, etc.

Treatment

Redefine “Care-Giver”

Benefits of Compassion – for others and self.

Unlike empathy, compassion increases activity in the areas of the brain involved in dopaminergic reward and oxytocin-related affiliative processes. This enhances positive emotions in adverse situations.

Oxytocin is the moral/Love/cuddle hormone. Connects us to others emotionally.

Blocked by Stress (cortisol) and Testosterone

Identify your Life- preservers – seek the good in what you do.

Flip the Switch!

Self-Care – An ethical imperative. Improved self-care is the cornerstone of mitigating the impact of compassion fatigue¹ (Compassion Fatigue Workbook)

Resiliency

Set Healthy Boundaries