

Prioritizing Yourself: A Look into Veterinary Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Kellye Berkley BS, LVT, CFFP

Outline

- Recognition of mental distress in veterinary medicine
- Describe burnout; primary types and suggested causes
- Compassion fatigue; compassion stress vs. exhaustion
- Explain the importance of burnout and compassion fatigue
- Clinical signs of burnout vs. compassion fatigue
- Diagnosis of burnout or compassion fatigue
- Prevention of compassion fatigue
- Resources

Disclaimer

As a Licensed Veterinary Technician and Certified Compassion Fatigue Professional, I feel I have a first look at the mental stress that we experience daily; **however, I am not a credentialed mental health counselor.**

What I can offer you are helpful resources, better insight/mindful practicing tips to better your mental help. Most importantly, I can be your listening ear and your safe zone.

Mental Distress in Veterinary Medicine

- In 2017, Merck Animal Health released an inaugural veterinary wellbeing study.
- From this study it was determined,
- Psychological distress is more prevalent in the veterinary career than average rates of the general population
- Younger veterinarians were the most at risk in veterinary medicine.
- At least 41% of responders would NOT recommend the profession to loved ones.

Special Report

Executive summary of the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study

John O. Volk, DVM
Ulrich Schenck, PhD
Elizabeth B. Strand, MS, LSW
Linda K. Lord, DVM, PhD
Colin W. Siren, BA

From Praxis Consulting Inc., 12005 Ford Rd., Ste 500, Dallas, TX 75231 (Volk); the Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6, Canada (Schenck); the College of Social Work and College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996 (Strand); Merck Animal Health, 2 Grady Farm, Marlborough, MA 01740 (Lord); and Kymetec, 40 Norwich St. E., Guelph, ON N1H 2S6, Canada (Siren).
Address correspondence to Mr. Volk (john@volkonline.com).
This article has not undergone peer review; opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the AVMA.

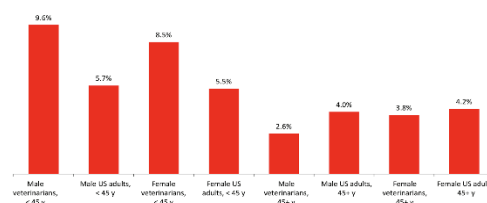


Figure 4—Prevalence of serious psychological distress (defined as a Kessler Psychological Distress score ≥ 13 on a scale from 0 to 24) among respondents to the MAH Study, categorized on the basis of gender and age, and employed US adults in the PSD. For each gender-age pair, prevalence of serious psychological distress was different between veterinarians and employed US adults, except for female veterinarians ≥ 45 years of age versus female US adults ≥ 45 years of age.

Mental Distress in Veterinary Medicine

- In 2020, the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing study statistics showed roughly the same in comparison to the 2017 study
- However, there was a slight improvement of attitude on seeking help for mental distress
- In 2021, during the pandemic, the study revealed closely the same statistics.
- In this study it showed the addition to mental distress in veterinary staff, which revealed a higher rate than veterinarians.

Burnout

- Burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors within the workplace.

Two primary types of burnout:

- Meaning burnout
when the call of caring for others no longer has meaning.
- Caring Burnout
the decreased ability to be professionally attached.

Suggested causes of Burnout:

- Work overload
- Lack of control
- Insufficient Recognition/Reward
- Poor Workplace Relationships
- Lack of Fairness
- Values of Conflict
- Ethical/Moral Dilemmas

Burnout Symptoms:

- Feeling exhausted or drained
- Frequent or chronic illnesses
- Feeling of failure or helplessness
- Lack of self-worth
- Withdrawal
- Isolation

- Disassociation
- Irritability or easily frustrated with oneself/others
- Frequent absence from work or late/leaving early
- Self-harm or intrusive thoughts
- Abuse of food, drugs, alcohol, etc.

Compassion Fatigue

- Also known as vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress.
- Compassion fatigue is the emotional, mental, or spiritual distress in those providing care to others. It is mostly associated with caregivers who continuously “take on others’ burden.”

Secondary Traumatic Stress

- The sympathetic nervous system is firing at all ends.
- Due to the increased stress the body’s instinct is to enter “fight or flight” mode.
- Another way to look at this is “arousal” vs. “avoidance”

Compassion Stress vs. Compassion Exhaustion

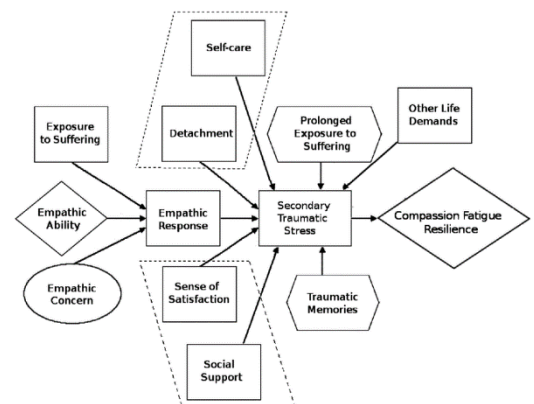
- Compassion Stress- is the demand to be compassionate and efficient
- Compassion Exhaustion- is the constant need and heightened stress levels associated with your job.

Compassion Fatigue Symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Feeling tired or lack of sleep
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of self-care
- Poor hygiene
- Illnesses or weakened immunity
- Increased negativity or apathy

Figley’s Model for Predicting and Preventing Compassion Fatigue

- The initial response to the emotional trigger leads to secondary traumatic stress. Prolonged exposure to this



suffering or emotional distress will lead to compassion fatigue.

Self-Evaluation

- **Self-Awareness**
 - Define “the why”
 - Personality Assessment
 - Myers-Briggs
 - Enneagram
 - Perfectionism
 - Too often it is easy for veterinary professionals to be “perfectionists”
 - Recognizing negative and positive “perfectionist” tendencies.
 - Opportunities for growth such as delegation, trustworthy staff, etc.

Self-Evaluation

- **Developing your personal identity**
 - Most of the time, people in caring roles take on the role of “caregiver” as their identity.
 - Identity:
 - is based on experience, interests, values, personality, and beliefs.
 - i.e. Religious views, morals, family, quality of time/work, personal growth, background, etc.

Self-Evaluation

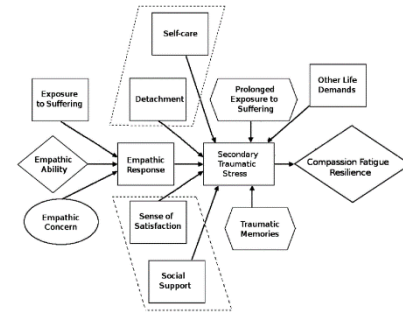
- **Emotional Intelligence**
 - Ability to recognize and regulate emotions
 - Consider the 6 core emotions; Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Surprise.

ProQul Compassion Fatigue Assessment

- [ProQOL Measure | ProQOL](#)

Figley's Model for Predicting and Preventing Compassion Fatigue

- Ways to prevent compassion fatigue as discussed in this model



Detachment

- Setting professional and personal boundaries
 - Adding a clear boundary for your coworkers, clients, etc.
 - Discussion for success with your supervisors
- Knowing your worth
 - Taking pride in your experience and your skill
- Set Expectations for yourself
- Stepping away
 - Taking a step back to stressful situations
 - Exploring new fields of medicine
 - Leaving the profession

Sense of Satisfaction

- Praise and Reward
 - Develop how you like to receive praise
 - Show praise to other
- Self-Help Goals
- Task lists

Social Support

- Coworkers
 - Fostering a good working relationships
- Family
 - Open communication with family

- Friends
- Mentorship
 - One on one guided mentorship programs
 - Involvement in technical organization
 - Accountability partnerships

Self-Care

- 8 Types of Self Care:
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Financial
 - Professional
 - Personal
 - Spiritual
 - Social
 - Environmental
- Basic Self Care Needs:
 - Sleep
 - Exercise
 - Nutrition

Self-Care Emergency Cards

1. 4 count breathing technique or pressure point therapy
2. Count from 10 slowly
3. Step away, if needed
4. Drink water/caffeine or eat a snack.
5. Call friend or husband

Organizational Ways to Prevent Burnout

- Acknowledging the problem
- Harness leadership power
- Implement targeted interventions
- Build workplace community
- Promote flexibility

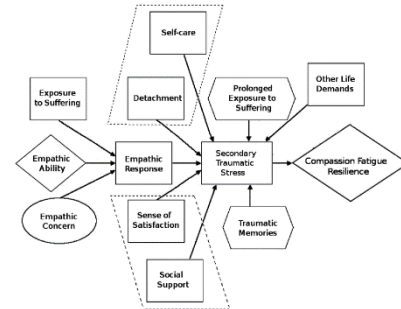
- Promote work-life integration
- Provide wellbeing resources

Figley's Model for Predicting and Preventing Compassion Fatigue

- The prolonged exposure of STS also leads to resiliency.

Resiliency

- This is determined as the ability to “bounce back”
- Resilience is a skill. With practice skills can be perfected.
- But with any development of a skill, there is the potential for setbacks or challenges.



Mental Distress in Veterinary Medicine

According to our most recent and ongoing Veterinary Wellbeing Study from Merck Animal Health:

- There has been an increase in satisfaction and pride for their work (80% believing their work has positive impacts.)
- Results have indicated there is a higher rate of positive conversations about mental wellbeing in the workplace
- There is a 38% rate of employers offering more mental wellbeing resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs. This is an increase compared to previous studies, 2017, 2019, 2021.

January 15, 2024

[Merck Animal Health's Fourth Veterinary Wellbeing Study Indicates Progress in Addressing Mental Health Challenges Among Veterinary Teams](#)

More veterinary professionals are provided access to and are pursuing mental health resources for their overall wellbeing with continued improvements on the horizon

DALEMAV 01 | Jan 15, 2024 | Merck Animal Health, known as MSD Animal Health outside the United States

Resources for Mental Health

