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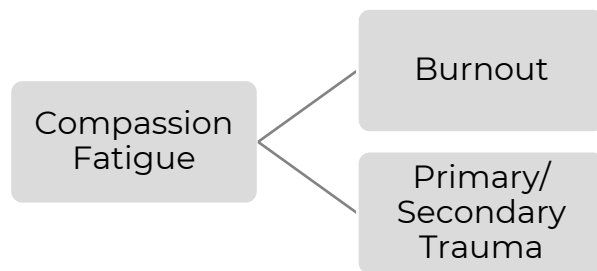
Breaking Down the Wellbeing Lingo: What does it all mean?

It's now widely understood that veterinary medicine is grappling with issues impacting professional wellbeing. While terms like burnout, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are more widely used, there remains a growing misunderstanding of their meanings.

BURNOUT, SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS & COMPASSION FATIGUE

Professional quality of life refers to job-related experiences a person may have that impact one's wellbeing and performance.¹ The two core experiences of professional quality of life include compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue.

More specifically, compassion fatigue can occur when conditions of unresolved burnout, primary trauma and secondary traumatic stress are present.



Burnout

Chronic stress, when left unmanaged or unable to change, can lead to burnout. Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson, creators of the Maslach Burnout Inventory², offer a helpful framework to understand the root causes of professional burnout:

1. Lack of Control
2. Insufficient Reward
3. Lack of Community
4. Lack of Fairness
5. Conflict in Values
6. Work Overload

While many of the root causes of burnout are systemic in nature, it is felt deeply at an individual and team level. Chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy in one's work may be signs that burnout is occurring.

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11356-018-1240-y>

² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.4030020205>

Secondary Traumatic Stress

While veterinary medicine is not the only profession susceptible to secondary traumatic stress, professionals are exposed to a high degree of trauma, bearing witness to the pain and suffering of their patients and clients as well as listening to experiences of pain and suffering from clients and colleagues.

Exposure to pain and suffering is a part of many helping professions. However, secondary traumatic stress (also known as vicarious trauma) refers to the inability to manage the stress associated with exposure to the pain and suffering of others.

Work-related trauma can generate feelings of fear, worry, sadness and anger, that when left unprocessed, can begin to shift people's worldviews and ways of thinking. Common signs of secondary traumatic stress include replaying and reexperiencing traumatic events, nightmares, and avoiding situations or things that remind people of the traumatic situation.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue refers to the "profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate"³ Those with unresolved personal and professional trauma tend to increase one's likelihood for experiencing compassion fatigue.

According to the Traumatology Institute⁴, the impacts of compassion fatigue manifest through the following phases:

1. Zealot: We begin our work committed, involved, and invested.
2. Irritability: We begin to 'cut corners in our work, a sign that our investment is beginning to diminish
3. Withdrawal: We begin to pull and shut down from patients, clients and/or colleagues
4. Zombie: We function on automatic pilot and attempt to create responses to prevent being further hurt from our work.

Over time, we begin to experience a diminished capacity to listen and effectively communicate with clients because: a) Our own experiences are being triggered in the work we are doing and b) Chronic workplace stress remains unmanaged or unaltered.

³ <https://www.tendacademy.ca/what-is-compassion-fatigue/>

⁴ <https://psychink.com/>

RESPONSES

The good news is that compassion fatigue is highly receptive to change. This is important because when these occupational hazards are prevented and/or addressed, veterinary professionals can thrive both professionally and personally.

Although interconnected, the micro and macro responses required to address burnout, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue can differ.

Burnout

Because many of the root causes of burnout are highly systemic, changes to the ways hospitals and teams function is required. One helpful framework to address professional burnout is to focus on psychological health and safety.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, through its National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace⁵, has identified 13 factors to promote mental health and wellbeing:

- Psychological and social support
- Clear leadership and expectations
- Civility and respect
- Psychological demands
- Growth and development
- Recognition and reward
- Involvement and influence
- Workload management
- Engagement
- Balance
- Psychological protection
- Protection of physical safety

The Mental Health Commission offers a variety of tools to support organizations as they integrate these factors into their workplaces.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Because exposure to pain and suffering of others is inevitable in veterinary medicine, building individual and team processing tools is important to prevent vicarious trauma or address it should it occur. Things to consider include:

- Veterinary Hospital Social Worker for individual support
- Referrals and subsidies for external mental health professionals with experience in veterinary medicine (Employee Assistance Programs are not always sufficient)
- Critical incident debriefing
- Team debriefing

⁵ <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard/>

- Peer support programs

Promoting overall self-care as it relates to the dimensions of wellbeing⁶ is important for all veterinary professionals and veterinary practices must determine what they can do to support such growth. This is particularly important if people are also experiencing unresolved personal trauma which can further exasperate the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue.

By addressing both burnout and secondary traumatic stress at micro, mezzo and macro levels, the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue diminishes. Instead, opportunities for compassion satisfaction, that is, the “degree of fulfillment, sense of purpose and satisfaction from working as a care provider”⁷ improve.

⁶ <https://shcs.ucdavis.edu/health-and-wellness/eight-dimensions-wellness>

⁷

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6526492/#:~:text=Compassion%20satisfaction%20is%20a%20degree,environment%2C%20or%20gratification%20from%20caregiving.>