

# MENTAL WELLBEING IN THE VETERINARY AND ANIMAL WELFARE PROFESSIONAL



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## Outline

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- **Compassion Fatigue**
- **Burnout**
- **Depression**
- Risk for Animal Care Professionals
- Addressing the Problem
  - Seeking Help
  - Prevention

## Dictionary Definitions

- 3
- **Compassion fatigue**
  - Fatigue, emotional distress, or apathy resulting from constant demands of **caring for others** or from constant appeals from charities
- **Burnout**
  - Cumulative process; emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased **workload and institutional stress** or frustration
- **Depression**
  - Mood disorder characterized by **persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest**; affects how person feels, thinks, behaves; can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems

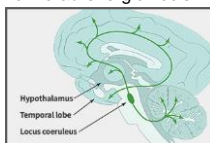


## Compassion Fatigue

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- Compassion fatigue
  - The "cost of caring" for others in emotional and physical pain (Figley, 1982)
- Considered an occupational hazard for those in many medical fields
  - Physical and emotional exhaustion
  - Can change person's ability to feel empathy
  - Loss of enjoyment of job
- *Can lead to depression*

## Neurobiology of Compassion Fatigue

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- Amygdala detect and assess threat
  - Fear response
    - Surge of norepinephrine from locus coeruleus (LC)
      - Cluster of noradrenergic nuclei in brainstem



- Repeated exposure → Prolonged/ Repeated activation → Hypervigilance

## Compassion Fatigue

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- Can occur suddenly after particularly stressful/ traumatic case
  - Become more cynical at work
  - Increased risk of making errors
  - Lose respect for clients, patients, coworkers
  - Contribute to toxic work environment
  - Affect relationships outside of work

## Compassion Fatigue in Animal Care Professions

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- Euthanasia
- Lack of resources
- Blame by public for problem created by public
  - Negative perceptions of shelter work
- Abuse/ neglect cases
- Bullying
  - Online especially vicious
- Contradictions
  - "Save them all" but "Don't let them suffer"

## Burnout in Animal Care Professions

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- Stressful, sometimes dangerous work environment
- Lower pay scales
  - Not for Profits
- Long work hours
- Understaffing
- Stress & pressure of providing continuous high level of care
  - Outbreaks, neonates, hoarding
- Disillusionment/ disconnect between job expectation and reality



## Depression

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- Experience lack of interest in or loss of enjoyment of daily activities
  - Occurring **longer than two weeks**
  - Impact daily life or work
    - Could include:
      - Change in appetite or weight
      - Change in sleep patterns
      - Decreased energy
      - Feelings of worthlessness
      - Difficulty concentrating
      - Increased irritability
      - Suicidal thoughts
- More than sad



## Depression

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- Genetics, learned behavior, **environment, stressful life event, chronic stress**
  - Often a combination
- 1 in 5 suffer from mental illness annually
  - US and Canada
  - 42.5 million adults (US)
    - U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 2014
  - 50% of those with major depression don't seek help

## Depression in Animal Care Professions

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- Compassion fatigue symptoms unrecognized or not addressed effectively
  - Can lead to depression, other mental and physical illnesses
- Work as helping professional can make person with history of depression more vulnerable to compassion fatigue (Dolce 2014)

## Depression in Veterinary Medicine

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- Serious psychological distress
  - Prevalence veterinarians = general population
    - Younger veterinarians % higher
  - Factors
    - Working longer hours, especially evenings
    - Financial worry
    - Student debt
  - Still only 50% getting help
    - 2018 Executive Summary from Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study JAVMA

## Suicide Statistics

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- 1,000,000,000 die by suicide annually each year worldwide (Platt 2012)
  - US: 13.0 deaths per 100,000 people (2014)
    - Highest rate in 28 years
  - Canada: 11.5 deaths per 100,000 people
- Suicide kills as many people as breast cancer (AFSP 2014)
- 85% of us will be touched by the suicide of someone close to us sometime in our life

## Suicide Statistics in Animal Care Professions

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- Veterinarians, physicians, nurses, pharmacists, dentists significantly higher risk than general population
  - Veterinarians four times risk of general population
  - Veterinarians two times risk of other medical professionals
- Similar findings in several countries
  - UK, Australia, Belgium, Norway, USA
- Animal control workers
  - Increased risk for work place suicide
    - Protective Service Occupations 5.3/ 1,000,000
    - National rate 1.5/ 1,000,000

Tiesmann et al. Am J Prev Med 2015

## Outline

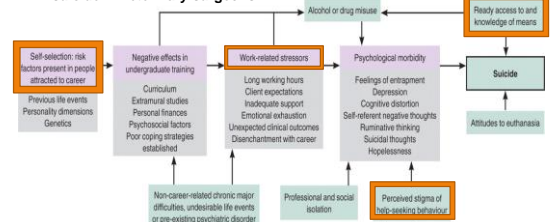
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- Compassion Fatigue
- Burnout
- Depression
- **Risk for Animal Care Professionals**
- Addressing the Problem
  - Seeking Help
  - Prevention

## Why is Veterinary Medicine at Increased Risk?

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Schematic representation of a hypothetical model to explain the risk of suicide in veterinary surgeons.



D. J. Bartram, and D. S. Baldwin *Veterinary Record* 2008;162:36-40

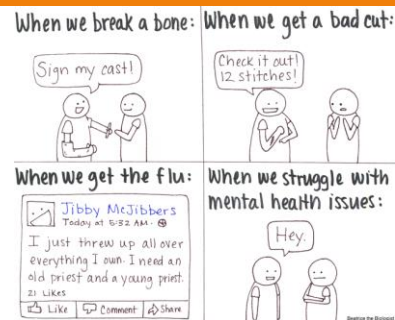
## Why are Animal Care Professions at Increased Risk?

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- High level stigma for mental illness and seeking treatment
- Work related stressors
  - Abuse, neglect, critical care
  - Negative perception of shelter work
- Increase ease of complaints/ liability
  - Against license
  - Online bullying
- Lack of readily accessible resources
- Extreme need for confidentiality

## Why are Animal Care Professions at Increased Risk?

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## Why are Animal Care Professions at Increased Risk?

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- Euthanasia
  - Frequently exposed to death- stressful
  - Frequent exposure to concept of death
    - Less fearful of death
  - Knowledge of and access to lethal drugs
- Witte 2012
  - Students exposed to euthanasia more frequently were less fearful of death
  - Did not apply to necropsy or surgery

## Outline

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- Compassion Fatigue
- Burnout
- Depression
- Risk for Animal Care Professionals
- **Addressing the Problem**
  - **Seeking Help**
  - **Prevention**

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Compassion fatigue (Dobbs 2014)
  - Happens to us all at some point
    - Occupational hazard
  - Recognize and acknowledge it
    - Learn to manage symptoms
    - Make access to resources confidential and easy
  - Set up and encourage prevention strategies

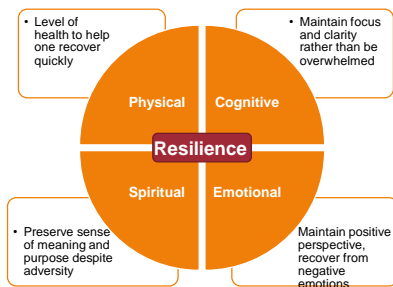
## What Can We Do About It?

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- Neuroplasticity
  - Makes recovery and resilience possible
- Self-regulation
  - Being able to accurately perceive and respond to suffering without losing sense of safety and self

## What Can We Do About It?

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## What Can We Do About It?

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Hettler 2016- National Institute of Wellness

## Wellbeing Dimensions

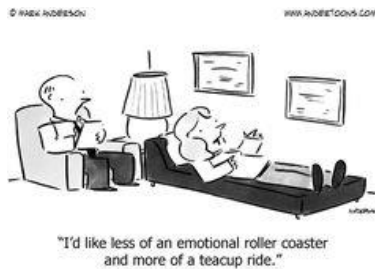
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- Started out with 6, then 7
- Newest resource has 9!
- AVMA 100 Healthy Tips to Support a Culture of Wellbeing



## Recognize and Acknowledge

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## What Can We Do About It?

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- Organizational resources
  - AVMA, CVMA
  - State, Provincial VMAs
    - Lack of awareness (10-14% of surveyed)
    - <50% found them useful
- EAPs and Organizational resources can be improved upon

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Identifying and addressing it in ourselves helps entire work team
  - Compassion Fatigue self-test
  - Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQuol)
  - Empath Test
    - Figley & Stamm
      - <http://www.compassionfatigue.org/pages/selftest.html>
  - Canadian Mental Health Association
    - <https://cmha.ca/mental-health-meter>
  - Umatter Wellness Assessment
    - <https://umatter.princeton.edu/action-matters/caring-yourself/wellness-wheel-assessment>

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Employee Assistance Programs
  - Rare
  - Offer regular assessments
  - Inform new members about possibility upon hire
    - Similar to informing about bites
  - Practices with:
    - Improved mental health
    - Increased production
    - More profitable



## What Can We Do About It?

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- Interactive Screening Program
  - <https://www.afsp.org/the-interactive-screening-program>
  - Adopted by organization (school or business)
  - Students/staff able to take anonymous online self-check questionnaire
  - Processed through system to assess person's level of risk

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Interactive Screening Program
  - <https://www.afsp.org/the-interactive-screening-program>
  - Personal connection
    - Counselor reviews answers, provides an individualized response, provide opportunity for anonymous online dialogue
    - Through dialogue, able to build a relationship, offer reassurance, connect individuals to help needed
  - Unique program
    - Able to reaches those that might not seek help on their own
      - Embarrassment, cost concern, not aware of services available, too depressed or overwhelmed to reach out

## What Can We Do About It?

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- QPR
  - Question...
    - a person about suicide
    - If you're wondering if you should ask, the person has probably considered suicide
  - Persuade...
    - a person to get help
    - Most important thing to do is to listen
  - Refer...
    - the person to the appropriate resource
    - Ideal to go with person to seek help
  - Not counseling, don't need to be a professional
  - CPR for mental health emergency
  - [www.qprinstitute.com/about.html](http://www.qprinstitute.com/about.html)

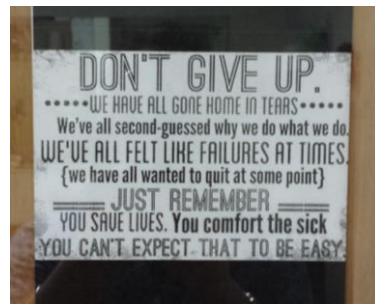
## What Can We Do About It?

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- Social worker or mental health professional
  - Stress management plan
    - Coping strategies
- Financial planner
  - Manage student debt, living expenses
- Healthy living activities
  - Yoga, meditation, volunteering, travel, religious services, socializing with friends, hobbies, reading, exercising, family time
  - Limit social media time

## Prevention Strategies

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## What Can We Do About It?

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- We can help each other
  - Create a culture of wellness
    - Recognize value of taking time for self-care
      - ***As important as taking care of the needs of others***
    - If don't care for self, have nothing left to give those around you
- Healthy living activities
  - Yoga, meditation, volunteering, travel, religious services, socializing with friends, hobbies, reading, exercising, family time

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Awareness
  - Become more informed
    - Prevalence and causes of mental illness, psychological distress
  - Be conscious of stigma of seeking professional help
    - Awareness of what we say and do
    - Avoid lazy labeling of mental illness
  - Getting professional help is an act of self-care
    - Self-care is critical to doing effective, ethical, sustainable and JOYFUL work (Dolce 2014)

## What Can We Do About It?

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- Low Impact Debriefing
  - <https://compassionfatigue.ca/low-impact-debriefing-how-to-stop-sliming-each-other/>
  - A way to discuss stressful events (venting) without inadvertently damaging or traumatizing person confided in

## What Can the Animal Care Professions Do About It?

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- Communication
  - The Public- open, transparent, non-reactionary
  - Staff/ Volunteers- active listening, conflict resolution
  - Family/ Friends
- Coping
  - At home- self care, hobbies
  - On job- debriefing, decision making SOPs, staff involvement in process, celebrations and counseling
  - In the community- sharing population data- successes and challenges, mobilize community to help

## What Can We Do About It?

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1. Take care of yourself- seek help if struggling
2. Recognize that perfection is neither attainable nor healthy motivator
3. Recognize asking for help shows strength and courage, not weakness
4. Take a risk and reach out if you suspect someone is struggling
5. Make mental health and well-being education a mandatory component of training
6. Demand acceptance and support of those seeking help for mental health struggles

## Conclusions

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- Compassion fatigue is a common problem in animal care professions
- Stress, compassion fatigue and burnout can lead to depression
- There is something you can do.
- Your life matters. You do not need to earn the right to take care of yourself. (Dolce 2014)
- You can help those around you, both individually and as an organization
- Prevention is worth saving a life!

## Resources- Suicide

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- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
- <http://www.afsp.org/coping-with-suicide-loss/find-support/find-a-support-group>
- American Association of Suicidology
- <http://www.suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors>
- Alliance of Hope for Suicide Survivors
- <http://www.allianceofhope.org/alliance-of-hope-for-suic/support-groups.html>
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education
- [http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page\\_id=4B0DEB88-F1DB-B293-A9A1A6E313A1B3DE](http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=4B0DEB88-F1DB-B293-A9A1A6E313A1B3DE)

## Resources- Wellness

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- AVMA Wellness Resources
  - <https://www.avma.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/Personal/PeerAndWellness/Pages/wellness-links.aspx>
- CVMA Wellness Resources
  - <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/veterinarian-health-and-wellness-resources>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
  - <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help>

## Resources- Assessments

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- National Wellness Institute
  - [https://www.nationalwellness.org/page/Six\\_Dimensions](https://www.nationalwellness.org/page/Six_Dimensions)
- Canadian Mental Health Association Mental Health Meter
  - <https://cmha.ca/mental-health-meter>
- U Matter Wellness Assessment
  - <https://umatter.princeton.edu/action-matters/caring-yourself/wellness-wheel-assessment>

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  - <https://thunderjump.wordpress.com/2014/10/04/once-more-onto-the-breach-dear-friends-once-more/>



## Thank You for Your Time!

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