

# “COMPASSION FATIGUE” ARE YOU AT RISK?

presented by

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**Are you tired?** We all get tired, but that is normal, and usually we can tell when we need to take a break. Unfortunately, in our chosen field of wildlife rehabilitation, we can easily become more than tired, but we still press on because there are lives to save, and we know what needs to be done! Let's face it, there are not that many experienced and licensed wildlife rehabilitators in North Carolina to oversee the vast areas we cover. So, we shift into autopilot and keep on keepin' on! However, we are all aware that rehabbing can get overwhelming at times. This, my friends, can very well culminate in **Compassion**



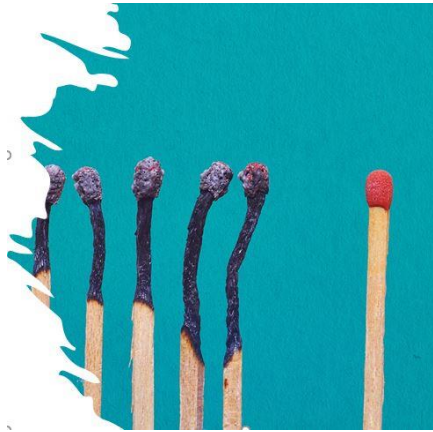
**Fatigue**, or what some call "burn-out" (but they are not the same), which can be debilitating despite being the excellent, seasoned and "God-Sent" wildlife rehabilitator you are. Yes, most of us know what CF is, but we don't dare speak of it because we are strong, capable, we

can handle it, and that will not happen to us.

**Truth be told . . .** it can, so let's talk about it.

## How is "COMPASSION FATIGUE" different from "BURN-OUT?"

Compassion Fatigue is NOT "burnout." Burnout is associated with stress and hassles involved in your work; it is very cumulative, is relatively predictable and frequently a vacation or change of job helps a great deal. Compassion Fatigue is quite different. Compassion Fatigue is a state of tension and preoccupation with the individual or cumulative trauma of clients as manifested in one or more ways including re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance/numbing of reminders of the event, and persistent arousal. Although similar to critical incident stress (being traumatized by something you experience or see), with Compassion Fatigue you are absorbing the trauma through the eyes and ears of your clients or patients. It can be thought of as secondary post-traumatic stress.



**Compassion Fatigue** is a defined concept, as well as a true condition that can include emotional, physical, and spiritual distress for those providing care to people or animals. Compassion Fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to **working with the suffering**, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. So, there is a cost to caring. Professionals who listen to the stories of fear, pain and suffering of others may feel similar fear, pain and suffering because they care. Professionals especially vulnerable to Compassion Fatigue (CF) include emergency care workers, counsellors, mental health professionals, medical professionals to include wildlife rehabilitators, clergy, advocate volunteers and human service workers. If you ever feel as though you are losing your sense of self to the clients you serve, in our case the animals and the public, you may be suffering from CF. It is associated with caregiving, especially providing care to those experiencing significant emotional or physical pain and suffering. So, it stands to reason that Compassion Fatigue is a serious occupational hazard for those in any type of helping profession such as our field, wildlife



rehabilitation. It should be no surprise that wildlife rehabilitators are deeply caring people with intense empathy for those most at risk and in our case that's wildlife, the underdogs of the underdogs.

### What Overwhelms You!

SHEER NUMBERS!  
TRYING TO DO IT ALL?  
HUMAN CRUELTY?  
GRIM OUTCOME?  
WHAT ELSE?



## COMPASSION FATIGUE DOESN'T PLAY FAVORITES!

*Stress is too much - too much work, too much pressure, too many Deadlines.*

*Burnout is **not enough** - not enough time, not enough resources, not enough energy.*

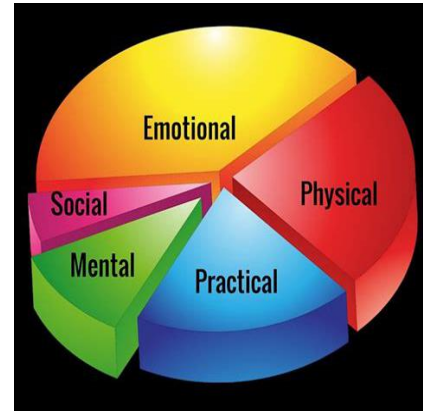
When you add **COMPASSION FATIGUE** to that mixture, you have a crippled individual, - body, mind, and spirit -

**DENIAL** is one of the most detrimental symptoms of Compassion Fatigue, even life's stressors. It can easily hinder your ability to assess the level of fatigue and stress in your life as well as thwart your efforts to begin the healing process. There are **human costs** associated with CF. Job performance goes down and mistakes go up. Morale drops and personal relationships are affected, peoples' home lives start to deteriorate, personality deteriorates and eventually it can lead to an overall decline in general health.

**Compassion Fatigue** can present in a number of ways, so we must continually self- assess. As a self-assessment, ask yourself these questions.

- Do you feel emotionally numb or drained at the end of the day?
- Do you enjoy your work but feel like you have nothing left to give?

If you answer yes to both of those questions, you might be suffering from compassion fatigue, and if that is the case, you are not alone. Feeling numb or overburdened in response to the vast duties and responsibilities you bear as a wildlife rehabilitator, does not make you less than kind. What you are feeling could instead be what mental health professionals view as "Compassion Fatigue." Anxiety, sadness, and low self-worth can also be symptoms of this sort of emotional exhaustion. Often, this stress condition is associated with caregivers such as wildlife rehabilitators because we continually care for wildlife and witness trauma on a daily basis. So, we are definitely at risk.



Things that we do routinely are the easiest to assess. Here are a few indications of Compassion Fatigue:

- Loss of sleep.
- Reduced sense of efficacy on the job.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Feeling overwhelmed with obligations.
- Apathy and emotional numbness.
- Secretive addictions or self-medicating in a variety of ways.



If we are finding that we have been negatively affected in a number of these areas, we can take on a more formal approach to a self-assessment.

**ASSESSING YOURSELF.** Agree or disagree with the statements listed under "Visible signs of compassion fatigue," and "Invisible signs of compassion fatigue" by checking yes or no. Total your "Yes" answers, then refer to the next page.

Visible signs of CF	y	n	Invisible signs of CF	y	n
Shows marked decline in work efficiency.			Feels reduced sense of accomplishment		
Intent on clinical tasks to detriment of patient interactions.			Feeling secretly happy when a job duty is canceled.		
More callous toward patients than in the past.			Avoids interactions with others (humans) when possible.		
Shows signs of mental or physical breakdown during a crisis.			Often leaves work feeling ineffective in your position.		
Outbursts of anger or irritability with little provocation.			Has mood swings with coworkers and the public, as well as with wildlife patients.		
Exhibits declining opinion of your caregiver role.			Harbors resentment about your role as a caregiver.		
Treats patients like impersonal objects.			Having unhealthy attachments to animals you are treating.		
Expressed a desire to explore an entirely different vocation or position.			Feeling that poor patient outcomes adversely affect continued performance.		
Repeatedly fails to fulfill clinical responsibilities.			Experiences anxiety when interacting with emotional rescuers or co-workers.		

TOTAL COMBINED "YES" ANSWERS  _____	What your score means:  0 - 2: No cause for immediate concern; 3 - 5: Investigate root causes of "Yes" answers.	6 - 18: Seek additional professional counseling
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**PREVENTION:** We must be equipped to take care of ourselves to prevent the onset that can lead to feelings of failure, guilt, self-doubt, sadness, and powerlessness.

- Individuals need to tap into these self-care measures:
- Create work/home/me-time balance
- Create a self-care plan and make a commitment to yourself to follow through
- Identify your triggers and stressors that create stress and burnout in your life/learn to manage them
- Build a healthy support system - Form a support network!
- Take the CF self-tests regularly. CF is never fully healed, and it can creep back into our lives.
- Raise your Compassion Satisfaction levels.

**Self-Care is a  
priority and necessity  
- not a luxury -  
in the work that we do.**

## RESOURCES TO HELP YOU:

There is a lot to know about the affliction of Compassion Fatigue; how to prevent it, how to recognize it and how to recover from it, but this is a good place to start. Here are some **resources** to help you take care of yourself:

**NWRA** offers a free "Compassion Fatigue" online seminar for their members. Check in with them on occasion to see when the next online seminar is scheduled.

**Brandon Hess**, who is a certified veterinary practice manager, and a certified compassion fatigue professional offers a multitude of recommendations and online courses to help you understand, recognize, and deal effectively and successfully with CF. In the meantime, here are a few tips to help you manage stress and hopefully reduce or prevent "Compassion Fatigue" as recommended by Brandon Hess:

- **Increase Your Awareness** by identifying your personal stressors in the moment and implementing your individualized preventative or treatment plan.
- **Set Boundaries** by drawing lines in the sand. Minimize what you take home from work, so it does not impact you or your family negatively. (Very hard to do as wildlife rehabilitators - but we can reach out for assistance and wear down our lists!)
- **Find Your Balance:** Work-Life balance is a term used often in caregiving fields. Make sure your scale is not weighing too heavy on the work-side and find positive life-side activities to keep yourself balanced.

**THIS CLASS**, provided by Wildlife Rehabilitators of North Carolina (WRNC) at our 21st Annual Symposium! (& I would like to add **Meditation** and **Exercise** to help you manage stress levels and prevent CF!)



## **Books are also resources available for you!**

- *To Save a Starfish: A Compassion-Fatigue Workbook for the Animal-Welfare Warrior*, 2016 (Blough)
- *Overcoming Compassion Fatigue: A Practical Resilience Workbook* Paperback, October 1, 2014 (Teater & Ludgate)
- *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization (Psychosocial Stress Series)* 1st Edition 2012 (Mathieu)
- Google: Upcoming Online Workshops for Compassion Fatigue
- Check with Colleges, Universities & Community Colleges in your area.

**NEW ZEALAND'S STORY:** A survey of New Zealanders who work and volunteer as wildlife rehabilitators has found that most are able to keep a healthy balance despite the pressures of the role. Even when workers have had a lot of training, the work can carry on for long periods, and there are multiple factors that put them at risk for compassion fatigue, a state of exhaustion that occurs from a prolonged exposure to the stresses of caring for sick and vulnerable animals such as high numbers of patients, animal mortality, a shortage of funding for their work, and the technical challenges of the work itself. However, the work can also have positive benefits for the worker, known as compassion satisfaction, which is the enriching feelings that result from caring for animals both personally and professionally. The balance between compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue is what we call their professional quality of life. Overall, the New Zealand sampling showed elevated levels of compassion satisfaction and low levels of compassion fatigue. These results have implications for veterinary and animal-related practice training. Vet students and wildlife rehabilitators should be introduced to the concepts of self-care and multidisciplinary tools to help maintain physical, and emotional health as introductory and ongoing training and evaluative practices and processes.





"Do not sacrifice yourself to help others. Increase yourself to help others. Your service and caring are gifts that should be nurtured and preserved. Be intentional and diligent about your own self-care."

Beverly Kyer,

### **IN SUMMARY:**

IDENTIFICATION, METHODS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT, SELF-CARE & ADDITIONAL SELF-CARE RESOURCES HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER**, if you can't take care of yourself, how the heck are you going to take care of anybody else? (whether they be feathery, furry, or scaly!)

**We need you WELL!**  
**They need you WELL!**

Thank You for Attending  
& Keep in Touch!

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