

Compassion Fatigue: The Cost of Caring

Human emotions in the care of laboratory animals

The human–animal bond exists in many forms. Kindness and concern for animals are desirable characteristics in animal care and research workers. Practices of gentle handling, compassion, and patience serve to build the bond between humans and animals. The development of the human-animal bond can improve animal welfare by minimizing stress, enhancing a sense of safety and security, and fostering trust. Close contact with animals can create feelings of satisfaction and affection in those who care for the animals.



According to work done by sociologist Arnold Arluke, laboratory animal technicians in nine biomedical laboratories and animal facilities confirmed the existence of the human-animal bond. Based on extensive interviews, Arluke reported, “Every technician I interviewed for this study experienced some form of attachment to a laboratory animal at least once in his or her career.”

Therefore, to find that workers experience grief or bereavement at the death of animals used for research or teaching is not surprising. Acknowledging that these feelings exist and providing support in the workplace are important. In addition, the bond between people and animals in the laboratory can minimize certain variables related to stress in the animals.

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), is an emotional state that was first recognized in the early 1990s in highly empathetic nurses who had lost their nurturing quality and compassion towards their patients. This condition is the result of witnessing and expending ongoing care for individuals who are experiencing some form of suffering and is often typified by chronic exposure to traumatic events. Over time, compassion fatigue was recognized in other health care providers working in fields such as trauma, hospice care, and psychological health. In the last decade, there has been increased awareness of this condition in animal health providers, but only very recently have we made this association with feelings that many of us have long experienced in the laboratory animal science community. Compassion fatigue can culminate in emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion that can come at a great professional and personal toll that affects our well-being. However, if it is addressed appropriately, individuals will feel validated, their coping mechanisms will be strengthened, and their ability to sustain or form new bonds will be reinforced. In the end, the research community can reap the benefits of these essential relationships. This brochure is designed to assist all members of the research team in understanding this common concern and provide suggestions and resources for managing human emotions in the care of laboratory animals.



An Emotional Experience

The regulations for animal care and use do not just specify efficient care, but call for the humane care of animals. Federal mandates require researchers to use procedures that avoid or minimize discomfort, distress, and pain. The research team must ensure that the animals live in conditions that provide for their health and well-being. NIH guidelines and federal regulations require enriching the environment of some species and planning protocols with attention to issues of pain and its relief.

Close contact with animals affords personnel intense feelings of satisfaction in knowing they are not only providing essential needs such as food, water, and clean bedding, but also affection. In return, many animals develop trust and a sense of security, which further enables environmental adaptation and stress reduction. When properly understood and used, the bond between people and laboratory animals minimizes stress-related variables.

However, many of us regularly witness or induce disease in healthy animals, observe morbidity and mortality in the animals we care for, and at times, euthanize animals for reasons other than alleviating pain or distress. Some people may experience guilt, uneasiness, frustration, and other feelings during a study. Experiencing grief at the death of laboratory animals is not surprising. Euthanasia is a complex and highly emotional issue. Although animals are treated humanely, emotions may be triggered in individuals who are directly or indirectly involved. Similar to human loss, when dealing with the death of an animal, feelings of grief and mourning may be evoked. Knowledge that these feelings exist and providing support in the workplace are important.

There is a tendency to think that only those working directly with animals are impacted. However, there are other individuals who may indirectly experience secondary traumatic stress. This may include business office staff, purchasing agents, IACUC administrators and members, cage wash teams, researchers sharing lab space with colleagues working with animal models and vendors, just to name a few. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences can be just as emotionally challenging as working directly with animals.

The Grieving Process

The stages of grief in people, as described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the concept of death and dying, include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The occurrence and timing of these stages may vary. An individual in mourning may feel as if he/she is on an emotional roller coaster, riddled with extreme highs and lows. People may express a sense of having “no control” over events, leading to feelings of frustration and fear.⁶

Ideally, an individual in mourning will eventually come full circle in the grief process by placing his/her emotions in proper perspective. To safeguard against feelings of loss, individuals may engage in a process known as “anticipatory grief.” Anticipatory grief is a process of emotional protection when an individual begins to subconsciously prepare for an imminent event, such as the death of an animal, by disengaging and electing from the onset not to bond with animals under their care. Personnel working in animal research may experience anticipatory grief, although it is rarely identified.

The mourning experience is initiated early and signals the individual to disengage from the animal for emotional protection later. Despite the mental preparation, the time of death may still be painful and difficult to accept.

On initial contact with a laboratory animal, an individual may realize that at some future point the animal may be euthanized. At that moment, he/she could decide not to bond with the animal in order to avoid experiencing grief at the animal's death. Walls that are built for emotional protection can eventually crumble, leaving one open and vulnerable. Contrary to the beliefs of some, lack of emotional expression does not necessarily provide a safeguard.

Hidden emotions may be revealed in the guise of other symptoms that may include:

- Expressions of psychosomatic illnesses, such as depression, lethargy, headaches, tightness in throat, and gastric disturbances
- Sleeplessness
- Poor appetite
- Impatience
- Inability to concentrate
- Severe mood swings
- Irritability
- Impaired personal and professional relationships

Neglected feelings can lead to:

- High staff turnover
- Loss of work days
- Decreased morale and poor attitude
- Delivery of diminished services
- Uncaring or callous attitude toward animals

Institutional-level strategies:

- Inform staff about wellness resources your institution offers or collaborates with other sources. This may be as simple as access to literature on wellness strategies or signing up for daily meditation sessions.
- Provide access to counseling resources. If your institution has this benefit, contact this service to inquire about their experience with compassion fatigue for individuals working with animals in biomedical research. If the service providers do not have previous experience with compassion fatigue, educate the mental health professionals to ensure they are prepared to support our community on this topic.
- For those programs that do not have the benefit of institutional counseling support, consider innovative partnerships that can provide this resource. Programs with students training in social work, psychology, or psychiatry may be able to provide these services to your community.

Organizational-level strategies:

- Add a compassion fatigue module to all levels of educational training from management courses to entry-level training. This may be particularly helpful when conducting euthanasia training.
- Partner with other care provider parent organizations to collaborate on innovative resource allocation or development.

How You Can Practice Self-Care

The most important and first step toward addressing this issue is to develop an understanding of what compassion fatigue is and how it has impacted you, or those around you – the costs for caring about animals and the work you do.

The next step is to recognize and acknowledge what situations can trigger compassion fatigue. The triggers may be very different for each person and are not always obvious. These initial steps allow us to start taking a more proactive approach to setting the self-care wheels in motion. It is helpful to do this before these events occur versus relying only on reactive strategies after compassion fatigue has already set in.

One of the most effective self-care strategies to practice is to recognize when compassion satisfaction occurs. Compassion satisfaction is the positive feelings, sense of accomplishment

or fulfillment, in providing for the needs of others. It can also be the sense of accomplishment and contribution gained through research that can lead to positive outcomes for human or animal health. In a sense, compassion satisfaction is an emotional counterbalance to compassion fatigue.

Taking time to connect with positive outcomes of the work that is done or supported is essential. By shifting the focus to the recognition of the positive aspects, compassion satisfaction is encouraged. Here are some examples of compassion satisfaction:

- Training individuals to proficiency on an animal technique or procedure
- Implementation of a protocol refinement that you recommended
- Observing animals explore and engage in a new enrichment device
- Establishing a successful social housing arrangement
- Managing an anesthesia case that had a smooth and stress free recovery
- Observing animals respond to an effective treatment plan
- Coordinating a complicated animal import or export with minimal transit times
- Observing reduced aggression in an animal colony due to your gentle and calm husbandry care
- Focusing on providing clean and sanitized housing to ensure humane and healthy animal enclosures



- Valuing productivity and throughput in cage wash to allow research progress
- Taking time to ensure efficiency of ordering supplies or billing to maximize research resources
- Realizing that each person is a part of the research team that continues to improve animal and human lives

Proactive strategies create an excellent foundation for growth, so consider spending some initial time on these approaches:

- Build your compassion satisfaction.
- Identify a support network where you feel comfortable and safe sharing your feelings. This may primarily be family and friends, but consider other resources such as coworkers, managers, mentors, or counselors.
- Before reaching out to your support network, take time to educate them on the important work you do. This is critical for ensuring your support network is emotionally prepared to assist you when needed.



Support is Key

Members of the research team are all key players in the pursuit of research progress. In addition to knowledge and skills, primary attributes of laboratory animal workers include feelings of compassion and sensitivity toward animals. Empathetic and caring personnel ensure that animals are treated humanely and with respect. Individuals who demonstrate caring behaviors while being allowed appropriate outlets for expression of emotions will remarkably enrich the overall research experience of humans and animals alike.

- Connect with positive outcomes of the work you do or support. Become informed on the animal models at your institution. If you have a personal connection with some aspect of the research, consider visiting the animal colony and talk with the researchers involved in these studies. Most researchers are very excited to discuss their work.
- Practice good self-management by taking time to physically and mentally recharge early and often. Develop your own self-awareness of knowing how and when to take care of yourself. Self-reflective care practices are valuable and individualized. For example, if exercise is your physical and mental recharge strategy, prioritize this as often as needed. Others may find refuge in practices such as meditation, a long walk with a friend or pet, or yoga.
- Gain proficiency in your animal care role. Confidence in your work can help minimize anxiety and provide comfort in how you perform a task or role.
- Learn about and perform competent, caring euthanasia for animals. Strive to improve euthanasia procedures to ensure a humane death for all laboratory creatures. This requires knowledge of the behavior patterns and methods for minimizing distress for each species. Just before or during euthanasia, it may be helpful to concentrate on soothing, calm images, thus communicating a gentle, peaceful attitude through body language.
- Determine the factors that influenced your decision to work in animal research.
- Recognize the benefits to the animals that a truly caring worker can provide.
- Directly observe the results of your hard work that lead to advancements in science and health. For example, visit burn centers, pediatric units, veterinary practices and talk to survivor groups.
- Understand the grieving process and complications related to repeated loss.
- Know that it is acceptable to express feelings and not be ashamed or embarrassed by emotional reactions.
- Form attachments with animals but keep perspective. Personnel can indeed be caring and sensitive while maintaining the integrity of research; one can demonstrate caring behaviors and still carry out necessary duties.
- Care for a pet at home. The presence of a pet lowers human stress levels.
- Actively seek out information/education on the needs of the various species with which he/she interacts.
- Concentrate on the benefits of research and how it has affected, someone in their lives in a positive way, such as through vaccines, surgery, etc.
- Take pride in the skills you possess that demonstrate humane behavior.

If you experience compassion fatigue, give yourself permission to experience fully that moment and those feelings. Acknowledgement is the crucial first step towards addressing your emotions. Additional reactive self-care strategies include:

- Know when to ask for help and build that comfort with your support network. Speak to a supervisor about receiving help if a particularly strong bond has been forged with an animal and the relationship inhibits the performance of necessary tasks. If you cannot perform an assigned task, someone else will be required to do so. Understanding this, you may decide to reconsider, realizing that the trust that has developed will serve to calm the animal and cause a less stressful reaction.
- Allow yourself to feel your emotions without judgment by being open and honest with your experience.
- Give yourself time to work through your experience and recover. Do not try to rush the process. If you feel sad, allow yourself time to experience this completely. You will know when it is time to move forward.

How You Can Help Your Staff

Workplace support may be provided through various strategies at the department, institution, or organization level. These strategies will support a culture of caring for your staff.

Departmental-level strategies:

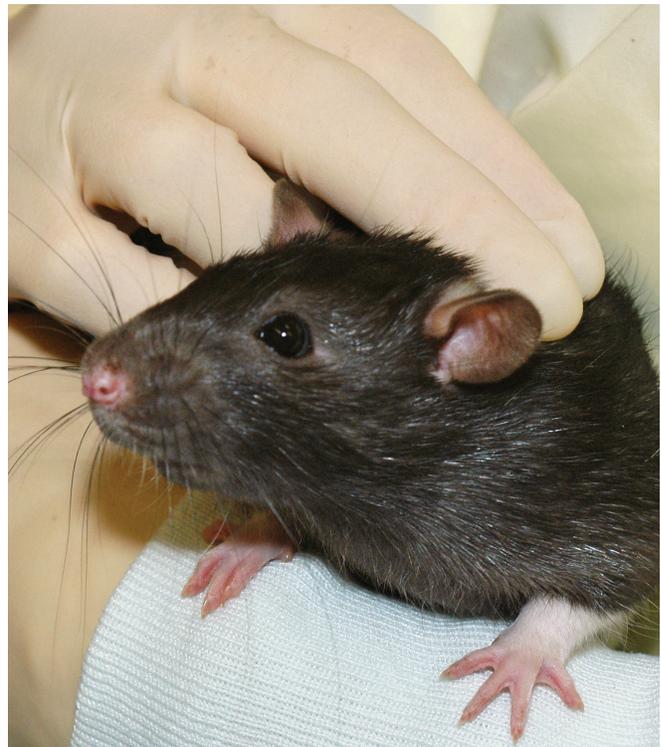
- Learn to recognize stresses to personnel related to euthanasia.
- Institute an open-door policy with supervisors/ administrators. to discuss these issues without embarrassment or shame
- Provide a pleasant work environment.
- Supply a comfortable break area for resting and reflecting.
- Offer education relative to humane animal care and use and ethics.
- Recruit investigators to conduct informational seminars for the research team highlighting the various aspects of their particular study (especially desired benefits and outcomes).
- Request investigators to detail the significance of specific end points of the studies.
- Encourage group support meetings among laboratory personnel, and enlist the aid of an outside professional to facilitate therapeutic sessions. By scheduling seminars and discussion sessions on this topic, some institutions have created an open environment that encourages employees to acknowledge their feelings on such issues.
- Rotate personnel to distribute job responsibilities and share difficult tasks.
- Ensure that individuals are trained to conduct euthanasia procedures. Individuals performing these procedures

must understand the mechanisms of action of each euthanasia agent or technique and how each contributes to ensuring a humane death.

- Initiate policies that do not require staff caring for animals for a long time to participate in the euthanasia of these animals. In some cases, however, the staff member may feel a moral obligation to perform the euthanasia if there is an established relationship of trust.
- Honor the request of an individual to be excused from euthanizing an animal to which he/she is particularly attached.
- Allow homes to be found for research animals suitable for adoption (after soliciting institutional and IACUC approval). Consider designating technicians to serve as primary contacts.

Summary

A research team member may work through his/her own grief, as well as the grief of co-workers. Support is essential for the sake of the research team, the animals, and for maintaining the dignity of animal research and teaching. By learning more about the grief process and by considering how we can console others, we can find ways to improve our support system in the laboratory animal workplace. Such support is important for any person who has experienced a major loss, whether of a family member, an animal, a relationship, personal health, or a job. Additionally, such support will help to maintain a healthy and productive climate in the animal research environment for both humans and animals.



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For more information:

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2. Self-Assessment – ProQOL. A website with resources on compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue and professional quality of life. Available at: http://www.proqol.org/Compassion_Fatigue.html and http://www.proqol.org/ProQoL_Test.html
3. American Association for Laboratory Animal Science. Webinar Recording: Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction in the Workplace. Available at: <https://www.aalas.org/store/detail?productId=6407095>
4. American Association for Laboratory Animal Science. Is the Cost of Caring Affecting Me? A brochure designed to assist all members of the research team in understanding this common concern and to provide suggestions and resources for managing human emotions in the care of laboratory animals. Available at: <https://www.aalas.org/education/educational-resources/cost-of-caring>.

