

# Compassion Fatigue: Self-Care 101

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I offer many thanks to Dr. Alan Wolfelt of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, internationally renowned and respected grief/bereavement expert in “companioning” the dying. There is also, a wealth of material available for free at [www.caregiver.com](http://www.caregiver.com).

Caregivers/care providers experience both physical and emotional stress when caring for patients with life-limiting disease. Approaching death is always stressful. We often think about the stresses of the pet’s human family members, but it is easy to forget the stress experienced by the veterinary healthcare team. We ignore at our peril our own needs in dealing with life-limiting disease, palliative care, hospice, and death. We risk “bereavement overload”. We can end up feeling either that we care more for the pet than the owner does OR we can end up feeling numb/uncaring.

“... (In order)... to be present to others in healing ways, we must find a way to massage our spirits” - - Dr. Alan Wolfelt

We can’t avoid stress. We may not even be able to reduce stress. Instead we need to focus on how we respond to the stress of dealing with life-limited patients. We cannot control the stress, but we can control our response to stress. There is much commonality to the recommendations for self-care across the board. It is key to think in terms of “balance” among many responsibilities. We need to enhance our ability to leave work at work. It is worth spending time reflecting on your personal responses to the stress of dealing with the dying. Self-awareness is an important component for success in preventing compassion fatigue. No matter which professional you read, you will find so much self-care common ground. Many of these recommendations are common sense, but sometimes we don’t put the pieces together well on our own or for ourselves.

We must take care of our physical self, our mental self, and our spiritual self. We must build a support network/system. What does this provide?

- Unconditional acceptance & support
- Help in complicated situations
- Mentoring
- Challenge to stretch your abilities
- Referral by others to your strengths

Quiet time and solitude are important. They create a boundary between us and the other parts of our busy lives. It is in the quiet time that you will discover/define your life mission. Meditation/prayer time or time in nature nurtures us on a soul level.

## Coping strategies to enhance balance

- Be clear about your patient’s reality
- Neither false hope nor premature disaster
- Extract the good/positive in your interactions with these patients and clients
- Talk honestly with friends and family about your work
- Prepare for and practice the “hard” conversations with these clients
- Accept personal responsibility for finding the best strategies for you to achieve and maintain balance
- Let go of what you cannot control within the context of caring for life-limited patients
- Give yourself permission to find a “safe space” at work
  - This may be your desk or “cube”
  - Perhaps the practice Comfort Room
  - Time alone in the staff common area
- Consider occasional “comfort food”
- Soothing music on your iPod, phone, etc
- Journal about your feelings when you are caring for life-limited patients
  - This is a terrific (and very effective) re-centering technique
- Allows you to “think out loud” and may help you plan your stress-busting strategies
- Keep a vision for the future of these pets and their families
  - Your focus on the future may help them focus on the future as well
- Pay close attention to details, but refrain from the “perfectionist” syndrome in your approach to work

Pay attention to leisure time and activities. This is not just time away from work. Leisure is a state of mind that provides self-motivated, enjoyable interactions with yourself, your environment, or other people. Leisure activities provide a focus outside of care-giving. They break the routine of work/care-giving. Commit to an activity of your choice and stick with it! What kind of activity

appeals to you? A new hobby? Restarting an old hobby? Would a friend enjoy the activity with you? Another person may keep you engaged and involved.

#### **More self-care strategies**

- Laugh about something every day
- Take care of yourself physically
  - Run, yoga, walk, stretch, strength training, Tai Chi, Tai Kwon Do, kick-box, swim, etc.
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Talk with someone you care about every day
- Let friends and family help you
- Give yourself permission to have a good cry - - tears reduce tension
- Exercise!!! (this shows up more than once for a reason!)
- Get enough rest/sleep
- Reduce daily caffeine intake
- Avoid noisy/tension-filled movies at night
- Take a break every single day
  - Lunch away from the practice or at least in a quiet place in the hospital
- Explore community resources and take advantage of them - - e.g. hospice training and networking
- Listen to your favorite music
- Learn/practice relaxation techniques
- Give yourself a treat at least once per month - - e.g. ice cream cone, sleeping an extra hour, massage, a night out with friends
- Know and honor your limitations
- Create specific goals for personal and professional development
  - Nothing moves us forward faster than learning something new
- Do one thing at a time
  - Multi-tasking is a myth...
- Work hardest when you work best
  - If you are a morning person, see if you can arrange your schedule to do most of your work early in the day
- Focus and reject
  - “Switch off” when away from work

#### **Create ways to honor pets that have passed**

- Annual/semi-annual remembrance ceremony
- Memorial page on the practice website
- Memorial scrapbook/notebook in reception area
- Picture bulletin board

#### **References**

Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice, Palliative Medicine and Hospice Care, May 2011, Volume 41, Number 3