The Human Factor:
Stress and burnout in animal related occupations

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Work Stress

• Definition: work stress has been described as an incompatibility between the individual and his or her work environment (Humphrey, 1998).

• The worker’s response to work stress can be either psychological, physical or both; usually categorized as being either acute, post traumatic, or chronic. (Lazarus, 1991).
Sources of “normal” work stress

- Little autonomy or control over one’s job
- Non-existent career ladders
- Inadequate resources to do the job
- High demands, workload, time pressures
- Lack of job security
- Understaffing
- Mandatory overtime
- Violence/Harassment
Effects of stress

• Early symptoms of stress-related problems include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Symptoms:</th>
<th>Psychological &amp; Behavioral:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stomach problems</td>
<td>Irritability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>Low morale</td>
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<td>Sleep disturbances</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>Alcohol &amp; drug use</td>
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<td>Muscle aches &amp; pains</td>
<td>Feeling powerless</td>
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<td>Chronic mild illnesses</td>
<td>Isolation from co-workers</td>
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**Chronic stress symptoms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Conditions:</th>
<th>Psychological &amp; Behavioral Problems:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Blood Pressure</td>
<td>Serious depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heart disease</td>
<td>Suicidal behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stroke</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spastic colon</td>
<td>Alcohol abuse</td>
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<td>Immune system dysfunction</td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>Burnout</td>
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<td>Asthma</td>
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<td>Musculoskeletal disorders</td>
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Special Report

A systematic review of the effects of euthanasia and occupational stress in personnel working with animals in animal shelters, veterinary clinics, and biomedical research facilities

Rebekah L. Scotney, GCVS; Deirdre McLaughlin, PhD; Helen L. Keates, BVSc, PhD

Background—The study of occupational stress and compassion fatigue in personnel working in animal-related occupations has gained momentum over the last decade. However, there remains incongruence in understanding what is currently termed compassion fatigue and the associated unique contributory factors. Furthermore, there is minimal established evidence of the likely influence of these conditions on the health and well-being of individuals working in various animal-related occupations.

Objective—To assess currently available evidence and terminology regarding occupational stress and compassion fatigue in personnel working in animal shelters, veterinary clinics,
Compassion Fatigue

• The study of occupational stress and compassion fatigue in personnel working in animal-related occupations has gained momentum over the last decade.

• “Compassion fatigue is a unique form of burnout which affects people in caregiving professions; where burnout is overpowering, invasive stress, that can begin to dominate us and interfere with our ability to function.” (Carla Joinson, 1992)

• Charles Figley (1995) described compassion fatigue as equivalent to secondary traumatic stress (STS) and defined it as the caregiver’s reduced capacity or interest in being empathic or “bearing the suffering of clients”.
• CF in animal-related professions is most often considered to be a direct result of the impact of **euthanasia**.

• Those working with animals within a **laboratory environment** face **intense emotional demands** on a day-to-day basis. Euthanasia particularly can be a **source of guilt**.

• Professionals who work with people or animals, particularly those who are suffering, must not only cope with the normal stress or dissatisfaction of work but also with their personal feelings and emotional response to that suffering.
• Entering because of their love of nonhuman animals.
• “Caring-killing paradox” (Arluke, 1994) - Not adequately prepared for the fact that one of their duties may be to kill these animals whom they care deeply for.
• Rollin (1986) - Moral stress: ‘...a particular type of stress associated with jobs that require killing animals that are clinically sound and perfectly normal for reasons other than alleviating pain and suffering.’
• Preliminary evidence suggests that people who look after animals and, as part of their occupation, are required to euthanize them should be regarded as an at-risk population for post-traumatic stress (PTS).
Occupational Stigma

- **Occupational stigma** - the **negative perception** of various animal-related work tasks including the **decision to euthanize**, the **use of animals in research**, and the global push toward the ideals of no-kill animal shelters.

- This stigma may further compound the effects of occupational stress and compassion fatigue and **lead to emotional dissonance** and the potential for emotional contagion not only between those directly involved in these tasks but also to ancillary and support staff.
• **Caring** for laboratory animals is a primary function for animal technicians and demands total commitment to ensuring all species receive the highest level of care and welfare during their time within a research facility.

• Caring for laboratory animals can generate *emotional dissonance* or conflict **→** job dissatisfaction, *stress* and *burnout*.

• Among animal technicians, emotional dissonance does indeed occur and in some cases can endure for many years where a *particular emotionally painful experience* has had a profound effect (Davies, 2010).
Coping Strategies

• **Social supports** - a number of studies suggest that social support networks are an instrumental coping resource in animal-related work.

• Improved education and awareness of the **positive impact animal care workers have in all fields** (research, teaching, animal control, veterinary medicine) should be prioritized to combat misconceptions about their personal character.

• For the majority of personnel studied, **exposure to continual occupational stress** appeared to **foster coping strategies** (providing they are able to maintain emotional resilience).

• Workers who can’t cope resign from animal related employment.
Reeve et al. (2005) suggest the highest degree of employee turnover occurs within the first year of experience with animal euthanasia, defining those who remained in veterinary clinics, animal shelters, and research facilities for over 2 years as being “survivors.”

Longitudinal studies that follow individuals over time are necessary, and these likely should incorporate objective physiologic measures of stress symptoms (e.g., measurement of blood cortisol concentration), with psychological evaluations.

This will facilitate the gathering of evidence on long-term effects of occupational stress and euthanasia-related strain in animal care workers and will also allow insight into whether those who remain in these fields as “survivors” or do so because they become desensitized or because they develop successful coping strategies.
The Importance of Emotional Resilience

• The ability to cope with intensive emotional demands and behave appropriately is very important both for the individuals and the animals with whom they are working.

• **Emotional labor** (Hochschild, 1983) - comprised of both the faking and the suppressing of emotion in the workplace.

• Negative consequences associated with emotional labor: general dissatisfaction, estrangement between self and true feelings, feeling robotic and un-empathetic, role overload, lack of work identity, lack of openness with co-workers, and ultimately burnout.

• We should ask ourselves whether animal technicians build such a strong resilience that they become ‘immune’ to the natural emotions they would have originally felt?
• Can regulating emotions over a prolonged period of time (emotional labor) cause research technicians to be more **susceptible to long term sickness**?

• The recognition of emotional labor for those working with animals in a laboratory environment is slowly becoming more widely discussed, but currently no measures have been put in place to deal with this.

• Emotional resilience training will ensure that individuals and managers can understand and regulate their own emotions in a way that is effective and beneficial maintaining a “healthy personality.”

• Individuals can be taught to listen without judgment, encourage expression of emotion in a controlled environment, encourage individuals to learn positively from their experiences, change negative thought patterns, and develop an ability to stand back from situations.
Benefits of happier workforce

- Reduce costs of absence, including sick pay, sickness cover, overtime, and recruitment.
- Improve workplace morale, have better working relationships, and increased employee satisfaction.
- Increase productivity, through employees being healthier, happier, and better motivated.
- Have protection from reputational damage and financial costs of prosecution or litigation.
- As a by-product of improved staff well-being, institutions may also see improvements in animal welfare and ultimately the 3Rs.
Confirming the Human – Animal Bond

• Feelings of satisfaction can arise from knowing that not only basic husbandry needs are met, but that animal welfare is enhanced by connecting through:
  ➢ Compassion
  ➢ Affection
  ➢ Respect

• The development of the human – animal bond can improve animal welfare by:
  ➢ Minimizing stress
  ➢ Enhancing a sense of safety and security
  ➢ Fostering trust.

• Close contact with animals can create feelings of satisfaction and affection.
Bibliography

• AALAS. Cost of Caring - Human emotions in the care of laboratory animals.
Thank you for listening