

Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in Laboratory Animal Professionals

By Heather Hersh, PsyD



Laboratory animal professionals are often drawn to the field by their connection to and compassion for animals and animal welfare. Because they are invested in animal wellbeing, these professionals care greatly and emotionally pour themselves into their work. Laboratory animal professionals are impacted by animal loss and are susceptible to compassion fatigue, especially when animals reach humane endpoints and are removed from study. Further, because veterinarians', veterinary technicians', and husbandry staff's work is stressful, busy, and often pressured, there may be risk for job burnout. These vulnerabilities became even higher during the COVID-19 pandemic when many had higher work stressors, continued working as they were considered essential, and may have had to cull additional animals due to research pauses.

Importantly, although compassion fatigue and burnout are similar, they are quite distinct. Compassion fatigue is defined as an overexposure to suffering and pain that can cause personal stress and a reduced capacity for empathy. In contrast, burnout is emotional exhaustion, decreased professional efficacy, diminished motivation, and lack of empathy brought on by the work environment.

Although veterinary professionals are at risk for both compassion fatigue and burnout, they often do not receive appropriate training to build their resilience and develop coping strategies to protect against these conditions. Additionally, veterinary management and leadership often struggle to determine how to best support their staff in order to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout.

This Special Topic Lecture, "Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in Laboratory Animal Professionals," will address these critical topics. The speaker holds a doctorate in psychology and has expertise in this critical area of emotional-health support for veterinary professionals.

During this lecture, important distinctions between compassion fatigue and burnout will be highlighted. In particular, the lecture includes the physical, behavioral, and psychological symptoms of compassion fatigue, which will enable managers and individual professionals to better understand these symptoms and what to monitor in themselves, colleagues, and staff.

The talk will provide practical recommendations for facility

leadership and management, including tools that will allow leadership and management the ability to evaluate, assess, and minimize compassion fatigue and burnout across teams. Attendees will also learn how facility leadership and management can support their teams through debriefing sessions and individual supervision, professional development, and staff empowerment. These and other tools are important means for managers to protect and enhance team wellbeing.

Additionally, for individual professionals in the field, the lecture will provide practical strategies to prevent compassion fatigue and to address it when it occurs. A self-assessment tool will be highlighted, which will give laboratory animal professionals a tool to monitor their own symptoms. As laboratory animal professionals are at risk of compassion fatigue, the lecture will also discuss how it is imperative they actively and regularly practice self-care to prevent and ameliorate compassion fatigue. Veterinary professionals will leave this lecture with an understanding of how to construct a practical compassion fatigue protection toolkit and personalized self-care plan to remain energized and engaged in this rewarding and important field.

Maintaining emotional wellbeing in the workplace requires that leadership, the animal care teams, and individuals have strategies and safeguards that allow everyone to thrive professionally and personally while providing high quality care to the animals. The target audience for this lecture is veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and husbandry staff.

Heather Hersh, PsyD, is the owner of Thrive Well-Being in Philadelphia, PA.

Compassion Fatigue and Job Burnout in the Animal Research Field

Tuesday, October 19

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM/Room: 2501A

Speaker: Heather Hersh

Moderator: F Claire Hankenson

Facilitator: Leah Makaron