



Compassion Fatigue

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We've all felt tired, to the point of feeling downright drained, from time-to-time. And we all know it's hard to have one day feeling like that, let alone several in a row. Yet have you ever considered the impact working in a shelter environment may have on staff and volunteers on a regular basis? Shelter workers and volunteers are at risk of experiencing Compassion Fatigue at some point during their career. As such, I decided to write about this topic for this edition of our Newsletter to bring awareness to our SARA Members about this rampant, all too familiar condition with shelter workers.

As SARA Members, we tend to focus our attention on the animals and helping them for their highest good. Yet as Animal Reiki Practitioners, we may be needed to work with more than just animals - we may also be needed to help those dedicated people who constantly tend to the animals, no matter what the animal may be going through. As energy workers, we know all too well that if a person helping an animal feels anger, grief, depletion, hopelessness, etc., the animal they're caring for will energetically be susceptible to those emotions as well. As Animal Reiki Practitioners, *there may be times when helping a shelter staff member is ultimately the better thing to do for the animals*, as opposed to sharing Reiki directly with the animals. After all, if there is one stressed-out employee tending to a dozen animals in a day, isn't it better to share Reiki with that one employee, thus bringing a supportive space of harmony and balance which can directly translate to the work s/he is doing? Although it takes less time to share Reiki with one person than with a dozen animals, just this one human treatment can have a far-reaching positive result.

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion Fatigue is defined as emotional exhaustion, caused by the stress of caring for traumatized or suffering animals or people (per Charles Figely, Ph.D., Director of Florida State University's Traumatology Institute). Many caregivers may have Compassion Fatigue without even realizing they have it. Similar to those who are caretakers for their elderly parents or an ill loved one, shelter workers are faced everyday with the same or similar emotions (and sometimes even more so).

On any given day, a shelter worker may have to deal with things such as: euthanasia; dealing with the public's careless attitude (e.g. - I don't want the cat because it scratched my door); becoming attached to an animal and seeing it adopted to a family (who they may or may not feel is right for the animal); hearing the moans of an animal post-surgery; seeing a shelter animal that was adopted being returned for one reason or another; seeing siblings separated (one is adopted, the other is not) and watching how lonely the sibling left behind becomes; seeing an animal stay in a shelter for a prolonged amount of time - not being adopted for one reason or another; hearing that a recently adopted animal escaped from its new owner and was hit/killed by a car, or is lost and can't be found. As trying as all of these situations are, sadly this list could go on even further.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

How do you know if you or someone in your shelter is experiencing Compassion Fatigue? Here are some of the symptoms/signs to watch out for:

- * Sudden outbursts of anger;
- * Depressed and/or feeling numb;
- * Contemplating quitting your job or excessively arriving to work late (and not caring);
- * Appearing cynical or having a "hard" exterior (as though nothing phases you);
- * Difficulty sleeping;
- * Feelings of isolation (from family/friends/hobbies);
- * Difficulty relating to people and coworkers;
- * Being sarcastic, snippy and uncooperative with others in and outside of the shelter;
- * Feelings of exhaustion;
- * Difficulty making decisions (even the simple ones);
- * You're suddenly accident prone;
- * You're subject to more health problems;
- * In an effort to diminish your true feelings, you turn to alcohol or drugs.

What Helps:

One crucial way to assist someone experiencing Compassion Fatigue is to help them help themselves. Most caregivers are so busy helping others, that they don't take any (or very little) time to nurture themselves. As a result, they're most likely running on empty. As Reiki Practitioners, we set an example by incorporating the Five Reiki Principles into our lives. We need to be that harbor of light/safety/shelter for those who are feeling low (whether it's an animal in need or one of his/her caretakers). If an employee seems out of sorts (or not "with it"), take the time to ask if s/he is okay. Then be present in listening. Be that listening ear, without necessarily trying to "fix it" for him or her. Whether it's listening to a story filled with grief or listening as s/he tries to sort through his or her own confusion aloud, be present and fully attentive. Offer hugs, if it feels appropriate. Affirm what s/he is feeling by maybe sharing a time when you, too, once felt that way (this will give them confirmation that what they're feeling isn't "bad" or "wrong").

Encourage them to breathe. Breath is so important and when we're feeling low, it's easy to forget to breathe. Subconsciously, we're cutting ourselves off from life. One way you can do this is by making sure you are breathing, thus encouraging the shelter worker you're with to mirror you and follow your example.

Offer the shelter worker water (it's important that they're hydrated) and try to get them to take a walk with you outside in nature. Just getting out of the shelter environment can help them detach (even if only for a few minutes). Plus, the exercise of walking will help, as will the innate healing properties of Nature itself.

If the shelter worker was extremely close to an animal that had to be euthanized, as Reiki Practitioners we can help them (and other employees/volunteers) hold a Memorial Service, connecting them with Spirit and stressing how their beloved animal friend is still with them, albeit in a different way, even though it may not seem so.

If a Shelter Worker seems to be suffering in silence, I encourage you to make his/her supervisor or close friend aware of what he or she is going through. Most of us are volunteers and are only present for a few hours a week; as such, we cannot personally keep an eye on someone who has turned to us. Trust your instincts and do what you feel is best for the worker you're concerned about.

And it goes without saying, offer Reiki - to the person, as well as to the situation. This may be a great way to introduce the worker to Reiki for the first time. As caretakers, they would most probably LOVE a Reiki Session but would never dare ask (after all, that would mean taking time away from the animals). And in a caretaker's mind, it's all about everyone else's needs first.

Lastly, if after helping a Shelter Worker/Volunteer you feel triggered or depleted in any way, make sure that you seek the help and care that you need to fully feel well-balanced and supported.

In Closing

As I did my research for this article, I learned that one of the worst things a Shelter Worker can hear is, "I could never work here (in the shelter) because I love animals too much." (Even though this may be said with all sincerity, it implies that the shelter workers must not really love animals!) Yes, there are many animal lovers out there; however, the true animal lovers are those who can embrace ALL aspects of caring for animals - performing the good, the bad, the happy and sad. Those who can day-after-day step up to the plate and do what is for the animal's highest good and not their own personal good. So the next time you meet a Shelter Worker, if it feels right go up to him/her and say, "You must truly love animals wholeheartedly to do the work that you do...what a genuine blessing you are for the animals."

May Grace guide you all as you share your light and your love with all connected to the Highest Good for our Beloved Animal Friends. © **Copyright Protected**