

It's OK ... NOT TO BE OKAY ...

Let's Talk Compassion fatigue - the cost of caring

Compassion is an emotion of which we ought never to be ashamed... HUGH BLAIR (<http://greatthoughtstreasury.com/author/hugh-blair>)

Animal Technicians throughout the UK are renowned for the care they afford to laboratory animals. Animal Technicians invest a lot of emotion in providing the best care and are devoted to ensuring that all the physical and psychological needs of their animals are met on a daily basis. The IAT is very proud of the high standard of care and welfare that Animal Technicians invest into animals under their care. As a result of the time spent with animals there is very often an emotional bond formed between the animal and technician, and when this bond is broken it can have a detrimental effect on the technician. A lot is invested into animal welfare but the welfare of the Animal Technicians should not be overlooked.

What is Compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is a state of exhaustion and biologic, physiologic and emotional dysfunction resulting from prolonged exposure to compassion stress.¹

How can compassion fatigue affect our Animal Techs?

Compassion fatigue can affect all those that care for and work with laboratory animals, including Animal Technicians, veterinary staff, researchers, and support staff. It is known as the "cost of caring". It can affect us emotionally to invest so much care for laboratory animals and the effect can be intensified in those that form strong bonds with their animals. This is an emotional cost that is paid little attention in the UK. In the USA, extensive research has been conducted and some very useful programmes are put into place surrounding compassion fatigue.

Susan A Iliff in her paper asks the question, 'Should we have a fourth "R" – Remembering the animals?'. This paper is a worthwhile read for Animal Technicians who potentially are exposed to compassion fatigue.

How do I recognise Compassion fatigue?

People who experience compassion fatigue may exhibit a variety of symptoms including:

- lowered concentration
- numbness or feelings of helplessness
- irritability
- lack of self-satisfaction
- withdrawal and detachment
- aches and pains
- work absenteeism
- excessive sadness or bottling up of emotions
- isolating oneself
- neglecting your appearance
- abusing substances to cope
- feeling mentally and physically tired
- having difficulty concentrating
- reduced sense of meaning or purpose in one's work



Support

Some establishments realise that compassion fatigue can have a large effect (often unrecognised) on Animal Technicians/care staff and are starting to put mechanisms together to help support the staff emotionally when times get hard. It is important to understand and appreciate the potential impact of compassion fatigue. Employers should try and support Animal Technicians as much as possible and try and spot the signs that compassion fatigue could be manifesting itself. In the USA support mechanisms have been put in place to support animal care staff, examples include:

- Welfare programmes or initiatives.
- Memorial gardens/ places of reflection.
- Memory boards / memory cards.
- AALAS compassion fatigue module.
- Fostering a culture of openness around compassion fatigue.

Currently work is ongoing surrounding compassion fatigue in the UK with establishments being encouraged to look at the effects on Animal Technicians and incorporate compassion fatigue into their culture of care. The IAT Equality and Diversity Group realises the impact of compassion fatigue and if you need any support please see <https://www.iat.org.uk/equality>

This article has been collated using information from the AALAS Compassion fatigue model which can be accessed through their website at www.aalas.org



Plaque of remembrance at the National Institute of Health

References:

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6526492/>

AALAS www.aalas.org

<http://greatthoughtstreasury.com/author/hugh-blair>

Iliff, Susan A. (2002). An Additional "R": Remembering the Animals. *ILAR Journal* 43(1), 38-47, 2002
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