"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."
-Viktor Frankl, M.D., Ph.D., Neurologist, Psychiatrist and Holocaust Survivor

**Compassion Fatigue**

While the term compassion fatigue was first coined in 1992, it existed eons before that. For as long as humans have provided care to others, compassion fatigue has been omnipresent.

It is the profound emotional, physical, psychological and even spiritual exhaustion and depletion that we feel when we are continually bearing witness to the pain and suffering of others. In veterinary medicine the “others” includes patients, clients and your co-workers and colleagues.

The very thing that you’re hard-wired to do, help others, is the very thing that creates the conditions for compassion fatigue.

It makes sense to think that the solution to compassion fatigue is to leave the work or shut down emotionally or even to self-medicate but those are short-term fixes that miss the opportunity to more deeply understand yourself.

**Burnout**

The term burnout is often used synonymously with compassion fatigue but it’s different. It’s different in it’s causes and solutions.

Burnout is a workplace-specific issue. It is the result of an unbalanced work: resource dynamic over time. Too much of one thing (work) and not enough resources to meet that demand (time, staff, appointment slots, etc.).

Signs and symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue can be similar: apathy, physical and mental exhaustion, anxiety, depression, self-medicating, insomnia or wanting to sleep more, physical ailments, hopelessness, anger and problems in personal relationships, to name a few.

Sometimes burnout can be solved with time away from the work. This is often not the case with compassion fatigue.

Those suffering from high levels of compassion fatigue can find relief through:

- getting support from a coach or therapist that specializes in compassion fatigue
- understand and practice self-care like it’s their job
- explore meditation and mindfulness practices
- journal daily
• monitor and select positive influences over negative
• learn how to reframe situations so you can see all sides
• make yourself and your mental health/wellbeing a priority

**Mind Management**

Our thinking can create a lot of self-induced suffering. We as humans are very hard on ourselves and self-criticism can really chip away at our self-esteem and ultimately our happiness. And then there are our thoughts about clients and our patients and our doctors and co-workers. One negative interaction can literally ruin our day!

How easily can we let go of things we can’t control? Do we beat ourselves up when things don’t go the way we want them to? Can we let ultimately let go of the unrealistic expectations we have for ourselves? Can we let go of the sadness and pain when the outcome is not what we desire?

**Managing our minds is a skill that provides us freedom from suffering.** Our emotions can become overwhelming, damaging and breed rumination.

**The Self-Coaching Model**

This self-coaching model can offer relief. Based on cognitive psychology, this model gives us the ability to identify thoughts that are creating negative emotions and then, and only then, we can change those thoughts to ones that make us feel better.

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**Circumstances:** Things that happen in the world that we cannot control.

**Thoughts:** Things that happen in your mind. This is where you self coach.

**Feelings:** Vibrations that happen in your body—caused by thoughts, not circumstances.

**Actions:** Behavior—what we do in the world. Caused by feelings, determined by thought.

**Results:** What we see in the world (our lives) as an effect of our actions. The result will always be evidence for the original thought.
This model is based on the following truths:
• We cannot control the world
• Nothing outside of us has the power to make us feel good or bad
• It is not the circumstances, but our thoughts about the circumstances that create our experience
• We attract what we think about
• Emotions lead to action
• We can’t permanently change our results without changing our thoughts
• We don’t have to get anything to feel better; we can feel better right now

Being conscious and choosing our thoughts are the most important components to feeling better.

**How to Feel Better**

Step 1. Understand that you are not your mind.
Step 2. Realize that your thoughts are not facts.
Step 3. Become aware of what you are thinking.
Step 4. When you don’t like the way you feel, change your thought.
“How can I see this differently?”
“How else can I interpret this situation?”
“How else can I think about this?”

Criteria for changing your thoughts.
1. Change your thought to one you believe.
2. And one that feels better when you think it.
Self-Care: What Actually Is It?

Self-care is hugely misunderstood. We think it’s something we have to go to the mall and buy or put in our shopping cart on Amazon.

It might be. But there’s a lot more to self-care than consumerism.

Self-care enhances our wellbeing. It’s an intention, activity or practice that we do on a regular basis to reduce stress and support our wellbeing.

Self-care is actually pretty basic. Essentially it’s taking care of ourselves.

Want to know the best way to feel better? Take care of yourself.

There are 5 areas of self-care:

Mental
Physical
Spiritual
Social
Emotional

Mental

Mental self-care is the balance between stimulating your mind and giving it a break.

Examples:
• Reading a book
• Taking a class
• Listening to music or a podcast (check out the Rekindling podcast!)
• Disconnecting from social media for a while
• Journaling
• Meditation
• Netflix/movies

Physical

Physical self-care relates to our health, nutrition and physical wellness.

Examples:
• Exercise
• Daily lotion
• Staying hydrated with water (at least 64 oz/day)
• Eating healthy
• Going to bed early, taking naps, getting at least 7-8 hours sleep/night
• Dancing when no one is looking (or when they are!)
• Washing your face at night
• Shaving your legs
• Regular doctor and dentist visits
• Taking your meds

**Spiritual**

This is your personal practice that allows you to follow the values and beliefs that give you purpose. Connecting to something greater than yourself (God, Higher Power, etc). It may be religious or it may not be.

Examples:
• Being in nature
• Yoga practice
• Going to church
• Meditation
• Volunteer work
• Prayer
• Reflecting on your why

**Social**

Although most associate self-care with being alone, social connection can also be a form of self-care. It can create a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Examples:
• Exercising with others (e.g. spin class)
• Walking with friends
• Starting a book club
• Organizing a family get together
• Taking a sip-n-paint class with co-workers
• Attending a conference
• Meet-ups

**Emotional**

Emotional self-care helps us understand ourselves more, cope with challenges and develop healthy relationships. When we tend to our emotional needs we cultivate a greater sense of compassion, kindness and love for ourselves.

Examples:
• Journaling about how you’re feeling
• Identifying what you’re feeling (Use the Feelings & Sensations handout!)
• Saying no to things that aren’t good for you
• Saying yes to things that are
• Working with a therapist or coach
• Feeling your feelings
• Connecting with a friend

Think self-care is selfish? How can taking care of yourself be selfish?

What if instead of it being selfish it’s our *responsibility* to take care of what we’ve been gifted. A mind, a body and a spirit.

Start small. Start with the most basic needs you have. And you don’t need a lot of time. Think 5-10 minutes.
Releasing Our Judgment of Self & Others

Humans are judgmental. We are all judging each other and the situation all the time. And there’s a very good reason for it, it helps keep us safe. Our primitive brain is designed to keep us safe and alive and therefore judges, safe or dangerous.

There’s safety in believing someone else is wrong and you are right, at least according to your primitive brain. If I believe you are “wrong” about something, it makes me “right” and in being “right”, there’s a perceived gain.

We judge clients and are judged by clients.

They shouldn’t be so mean to us.
Clients should be more appreciative of how hard we work to save their pets.
Clients should not complain about how much veterinary care costs.
They shouldn’t have a pet if they can’t afford it.

Probably sounds familiar. It’s a common narrative in veterinary medicine.

There is a cost to being judgmental. It feels horrible it’s exhausting and extremely depleting. It for sure leads to compassion fatigue. You can’t possible feel compassion and judgment at the same time. And where there is no compassion, there is no connection. We have to connect to pet owners in order to help their pets.

When our brains sense negativity, it creates a stress response in which adrenaline and cortisol are secreted and circulated throughout the body. These hormones are designed to make us run away from a threat not connect. Instead we have to get our brains to a feeling of safety so we can create a connection and thereby serve at the highest level.

Being judgmental is a choice and one we can choose differently. Instead of jumping to conclusions we can take a step back and open our minds up to other possibilities.
When we are pointing our finger at another, there’s actually 3 fingers pointing back at us.

Here’s how to get yourself out of judgment and into compassion and understanding.
1. Self-compassion
2. Recognize the story your brain is creating.
3. Practice empathy and see where you’re “just like them”