



Are You Headed for Compassion Collapse?

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Does your ability to be compassionate fade as the day moves on? You might think there are limits to your compassion, but researchers say you can increase your capacity to care...

Compassion is a powerful moral emotion. It can motivate you to feel empathy when others are suffering and enable you to live with others in peace.

Like you, I consider myself to be a compassionate person. Yet, sometimes I feel overburdened by the needs of others and find myself resisting the urge to reach out. Researcher C. Daryl Cameron at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill calls this the “collapse of compassion.” It occurs, he says, when you feel emotionally overwhelmed and turn off your feelings of compassion.

What Makes You Turn Off Compassion?

According to Cameron, two main factors might prompt you to actively and strategically control or limit your feelings of compassion. These factors are:

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1. concern about the financial and emotional costs of compassion, especially if your perception is that there are too many people who require your care
2. fear of burn-out or emotional exhaustion, especially if you perceive that others are expecting or even demanding that you be there for them

Since both of these conditions are ever-present in busy veterinary medical practices, it’s safe to assume you may have become quite skilled at regulating your feelings of compassion. Yet, as you likely know, turning off compassion, even for one day, can result in dissatisfied clients and a negative word-of-mouth reputation for your clinic.

So how can you sustain feelings of compassion when they are needed the most?

How to Keep Compassion Turned On

The following short-term strategies are designed to help you move past fears of becoming overwhelmed and stay grounded in your feelings of compassion. Using them consistently will help you help others without doing damage to yourself.

- ***Increase the sense that your helping truly makes a difference***

When, day after day, you see clients who are upset or grieving, it may be tempting to think that your offers of help are just “a drop in the bucket” compared to the emotional assistance they seem to require. Yet, survey participants in one study from human medicine said it was more important to work with a doctor who cared about them than one who cured them. Another study showed that only three brief gestures of empathy →

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were enough to make patients feel cared about and understood by their doctors.

Study after study shows small kindnesses do make a difference. Your challenge is to remember that, even when you're feeling rushed or tired, showing empathy by taking a minute to smile at your client or offer a few words of encouragement is often enough.

- ***Make helping opportunities seem less costly***

When it seems you are spending hours with clients who need extra support, remember there are local and online resources that can help you out. Most clients appreciate specific, timely referrals to counselors, veterinary specialists, or credible websites. Offering clients a trustworthy continuum of care can help you feel less burdened and alone.

- ***Train your brain to remain focused on the benefits of compassion***

Many meditation traditions and methods teach mindfulness techniques. Mindfulness is a proven way to reduce your own stress while being there for others. Mindfulness means attending to the present moment and accepting your experience without judging it. Practicing mindfulness helps you stay centered in your own values and maintain a healthy perspective about providing compassionate care.



Learning to accept your own internal emotional experience and defuse the fears you may have about becoming emotionally exhausted are the keys to increasing your capacity for compassion.

You can read Cameron's full article and learn more about compassion and compassion fatigue, in general, at the Greater Good Science Center at www.greatergood.berkeley.edu.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom[®] Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com