

## **Leaving Burnout Behind (AKA Compassion Fatigue Follows)**

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by Katherine Dobbs, RVT CVPM PHR  
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Web: [www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)  
[www.facebook.com/compassionfatigue](http://www.facebook.com/compassionfatigue)

Media Contact for [www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org):  
Dell Richards Publicity  
916-455-4790  
[dell@dellrichards.com](mailto:dell@dellrichards.com)

*"Burnout results from stresses that arise from the clinician's interaction with the work environment ... while compassion fatigue evolves specifically from the relationship between the clinician and the patient." -- Kearney et. al., 2009*

In my research on compassion fatigue, I have discovered that a term we hear more often, burnout, has many definitions but typically revolves around the work environment. The work environment includes everything about the job: the location, the scheduled hours, the pay, the morale of the team, the quality of management, etc. We often feel hopeless, if not helpless, to make the situation change in our favor. Yet there are ways. Patricia Smith of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project lists these ways to cope with burnout and stress in general:

- Accept that the situation itself is stressful
- Share your feelings with a trusted person
- Enhance your communication skills to be heard
- Initiate positive action to change your environment
- Suggest solutions to proper management
- Care for your personal needs
- Take time away from your stressful situation
- Allow others to help

The typical reaction to moderate levels of burnout is to complain. It is easy to moan and groan about the pay, the hours, the equipment, your coworkers and the management, etc. Yet this doesn't bring about change for the better. Communication and positive action is the best way to respond. There is no better person to suggest solutions to the management team than those employees who are working the job.

An individual's typical reaction to high levels of burnout is to change to another veterinary practice. This "change of scenery" may help alleviate the immediate causes of burnout. Perhaps the location is closer to home, the hours allow for more family time, the pay is better, and the morale and management is improved. Yet, in this new environment, it often happens that the individual does not feel much better. Things on the outside have improved, but there is unrest on the inside emotional level.

If changing the work environment and the burnout factors did not reduce or eliminate the emotional unrest, often an individual will opt to ask to return to their previous practice. They feel no better at the new practice, and would rather go back to an environment where at least they are familiar with the stressors.

There are also times when this road away from burnout will lead a medical professional to switch over to the "human" medical profession.

Some of these burnout factors may be alleviated by this change,

particularly when the same job is paid more money on the “human side.” Yet, if the individual suffers from compassion fatigue, and remains in a care giving profession (just changes species), then again there will exist an emotional unrest that needs to be addressed.

Many of us know or are one of those who have come, then gone, then come back once again to veterinary medicine. While we consider ourselves dedicated to the profession, we must apply that same sense of dedication to improving our mental outlook by learning more about burnout and compassion fatigue.

*Patricia Smith is a certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project© ([www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)), the outreach division of Healthy Caregiving, LLC, she writes, speaks and facilitates workshops nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has authored several books including *To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving*, which is available at [www.healthycaregiving.com](http://www.healthycaregiving.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).*