

Care for the Heart of the Caregiver: Cultivating Compassion

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Objectives

- Define terms related to compassion and self-care
- Understand personal challenges to self-care
- Review strategies and techniques to improve current practices
- Set a self-care, self-compassion goal

Introduction

As highly committed and dedicated individuals who work hard to care for their patients, clients, colleagues, and communities, veterinary professionals give a lot of themselves. For those who devote their lives to the service of others, the physical, emotional, and spiritual demands can lead to exhaustion. With ever-growing expectations and increasing workload, the natural response may be to work harder, to do more, until there is nothing left to give. The good news is that as caring individuals you have the capacity to focus that care on yourself. With development of a healthy practice you can continue to effectively provide complete and compassionate care for others, while taking care of yourself.

Concepts and Terms

Compassion: The feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to attend to and relieve that suffering. Feelings of concern FOR another. Two Dimensions: 1) the affective feeling of caring for a suffering person 2) the motivation to relieve the others person's suffering

Compassion Fatigue: "Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper" Dr. Charles Figley. S A state of reduced capacity for compassion as a consequence of being exhausted from absorbing the suffering of others.

Compassion Satisfaction: Positive aspects of working as a helper caring for others. Compassion makes us feel good: Compassionate action (e.g., giving to charity) activates pleasure circuits in the brain, and compassion training programs, even very brief ones, strengthen brain circuits for pleasure and reward and lead to lasting increases in self-reported happiness.

Empathy: Our ability to take the perspective of, and feel the emotions of, another person. Feeling WITH or INTO the other, sharing the same feeling with another person. Taking the suffering on as if it were yours.

Empathic Distress: Self-oriented emotions which arise when empathizing with the suffering of another person can lead to strong feelings of distress and aversive emotions

in the observer. Unregulated empathy becomes problematic as it causes a desire to withdraw from the situation causing the suffering.

Resilience: 1) The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity
2) The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness

Self-Compassion: Extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering. Kristin Neff has defined self-compassion as being composed of three main components – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Strategies

Breathe

4 X4 Breathing: Sit quietly and close your eyes or cast them downward. Breathe in for the count of 4, pause for the count of 4, breathe out for the count of 4, and pause for the count of 4. Repeat for at least 6 breaths.

5 Senses Breathing: Sit quietly. Take 4 deep breaths, breathing in relaxation and breathing out tension. As you continue breathing, focus on your body, how it feels in the chair, feet on the ground, hands, back, front, and settle into your body and ground down. Now move your focus to your sense of sight, what you see in the room, who is there, what are they doing, observe what is happening around you. Move your focus once again to sound, what do you hear, the noises in the room, voices, sounds both loud and soft. Now focus for a few breaths on any smells in the room and finally, any tastes. Once you have checked in with your 5 senses, take a few more deep breaths breathing in relaxation. Notice yourself fully present in your body in this moment.

Self Compassion:

Kristin Neff, professor of psychology and a leading researcher on the practice and benefits of self-compassion, describes self-compassion as having three components: self-kindness, recognition of our humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-Kindness- We sometimes make judgments and messages in our minds that put us down. We would not talk to another this way.

Common Humanity- Just like me, someone else would find this situation difficult. We are not the only ones.

Mindfulness- Being fully present in this moment without judgment.

Neff says practicing self-kindness means treating ourselves in a nonjudgmental and understanding way, like how we treat our friends. Recognizing our common humanity means seeing our flaws and imperfections as something that unites us to others, rather than setting oneself apart as a dysfunctional person. Mindfulness helps to develop self-compassion by acknowledging both our flaws and our positive qualities without ignoring our faults or without blowing them out of proportion.

Here are five steps to live out self-kindness, recognize your humanity, and be mindful of this in your day-to-day life.

- 1) Treat Yourself as You Would Treat Your Friend
Too often we hold ourselves to impossible standards and berate ourselves for our perceived failures. Ironically, the same faults we loathe about ourselves we see in our friends, but we are much more forgiving of their faults. Self-compassion allows us to acknowledge our flaws but at the same time, not let them be the defining feature of who we are.
- 2) Write a Letter to Yourself
Neff suggests an easy and effective way to cultivate self-compassion is to write a letter to yourself as if you were writing to a friend. Words of encouragement during hard times can go a long way. Write about your flaws and your positive qualities in a neutral way and not a negative or berating way.
- 3) Have a Go-To Phrase to Remind Yourself to be Compassionate
Have a phrase at the ready to remind yourself to be self-compassionate. When you find yourself thinking critical and self-defeating thoughts, repeat the phrase to give yourself a break from the hamster wheel of negativity and self-doubt. Practicing self-compassion is far from giving yourself a free pass or excuse for your mistakes. Instead, it means to not judge yourself too harshly and at the same time to not feel defensive.
- 4) Mindfulness
Practicing mindfulness is another recommended way to foster self-compassion. Mindfulness activities such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation can help you practice being nonjudgmental which is a key component of self-compassion.
- 5) Take a Self-Compassion Assessment
You might be feeling slightly overwhelmed by the thought of making a radical shift towards self-compassion. Start by taking this self-compassion assessment developed by Neff and her research team.

Making Stress Less Distressing

- A stimulus is not the same as a person's reaction to it. Don't blame the stimulus.
- There is no stress in any situation until a person has a "stress reaction" to it. Take responsibility for your response.
- A stressful situation can be beneficial.
- Good events in a person's life can be stressors.
- People who become convinced their situation has high levels of stress become less resilient.
- Today's emphasis on stress encourages people to feel helpless.

Ten Steps to increased resilience

- Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience.
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better.

- Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.
- Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly — even if it seems like a small accomplishment — that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"
- Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss.
- Nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.
- Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.
- Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.
- Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

Three Question Journal

The voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new vistas but in having new eyes. ~ Proust

This journal exercise draws on the wise work of Angeles Arrien, the author of The Fourfold Way. The exercise requires you to have a bound book in which to write and takes only 15 minutes a day. Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Most people do this in the evening after dinner. Review the day three times, each time asking yourself another question. The following instruction is useful:

Review your day as if you were watching a video. Start from the present moment and move backwards through your day, moving from dinnertime up until the time that you awoke in the morning, recalling the events you have experienced and the people you have encountered.

Review your day backwards three times.

The first time you review your day, ask yourself the question:

What surprised me today?

As soon as you find any answer to this question, stop your review and write it down. It is not necessary to write a great deal...the thing that is important is to reexamine your day from a new perspective – not how much you write about it. It is also not important to find the most surprising thing that happened; just write down the first surprising thing that comes to you in your review.

Then review your day from the present moment again, this time asking yourself the question:

What moved me or touched my heart today?

As soon as you find any answer to this question, stop your review and write it down.

Then review your day from the present moment again, this time asking the question:

What inspired me today?

As soon as you find an answer to this question, stop your review and write it down.

You are finished for the day!

At first, you may discover that nothing surprised or touched or inspired you. Don't be discouraged as this is surprisingly common among professionals. Then you may find things that surprised, touched, and inspired you that you did not notice at all during your day. After a while, you may begin to notice that things surprise, touch, and inspire you as they actually happen during the day. When this happens, notice any change you may experience in your attitude towards your work and the people around you...or any change in their attitude towards you.

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Resources and References

Healthy 100 Tips

<https://www.avma.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/PeerAndWellness/Documents/VetWellbeingSummit-100HealthyTips.pdf>

AAHA

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