

The Future of Compassion Fatigue Education: Working Partnerships with Mental Health Professionals

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by Kristin Buller and Jessica Dolce

The concept of compassion fatigue (CF) has received increased attention in the animal care and welfare professions in recent years. This is a positive trend. Today, thanks to courses such as IAABC's [Animal Behavior Consulting: Principles & Practice](#), which contains a full module on compassion fatigue, and websites such as [The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#), people who work with animals are better able to access resources informing them that they are not alone in feeling depleted or altered by their work as caregivers for people and pets who are stressed, traumatized, sick, and in need of compassionate services.

However, as interest in compassion fatigue continues to grow, it's important to be mindful of the quality of the resources being created to meet the increasing demand for compassion fatigue education. Just like dog training, compassion fatigue education is an unregulated industry. Anyone can advertise themselves as a compassion fatigue educator; there are no regulations or standardized training programs for this field. A variety of organizations do offer certificate programs for individuals who wish to become compassion fatigue educators. However, this process varies widely from one certifying organization to another, with some training programs being far more in-depth than others.

These certificates can be a good starting point for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of compassion fatigue, particularly management and leadership who wish to become better informed in order to support their staff and volunteers. But for those who intend to pursue a part- or full-time career in the compassion fatigue education field, the certification process alone will likely not be in-depth enough training to adequately build competency in safely engaging other people in this highly emotional, complex work.

Like their counterparts in professional dog training, professional compassion fatigue educators should demonstrate a commitment to ongoing education, support from other professionals, and clearly communicated boundaries that recognize the limitations of their skills and role.

Mental health and compassion fatigue education

Compassion fatigue is not a mental illness, [however research has revealed that one in six](#) veterinary professionals have considered suicide and [a recent poll of almost 4,000 veterinarians](#) revealed that 67 percent had experienced a period of depression, and of those, 37 percent said the period lasted longer than two weeks, which meets the clinical definition of depression. [A recent study](#) by the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reveals that animal rescue workers have a workplace suicide rate of 5.3 in 1 million workers. This is significantly higher than the average American worker. Additionally, [one in five of all Americans](#) experiences a mental health issue in any one year. Therefore, it's safe to assume that a significant portion of the animal care profession is also suffering, particularly if we acknowledge that untreated compassion fatigue may lead to clinical depression and other serious mental health issues and that for some professionals, there is ongoing exposure to highly traumatic events through their work.

Compassion fatigue educators are not mental health professionals, therapists, or counselors. They are educators. It is their role to share information about a common occupational hazard that many professionals and volunteers will likely encounter at one time or another during their careers. To be clear, some mental health professionals do provide compassion fatigue education; however, this service should not be confused with counseling. No matter who is providing the compassion fatigue education, the service remains educational in nature. Furthermore, even mental health professionals may need additional training in compassion fatigue education.

That being said, it is seemingly impossible to engage in compassion fatigue education work without mental health issues coming to the forefront. In our work with nearly 1,000 individuals online and in person, we are repeatedly confronted with professionals who are suffering from a wide range of mental health issues (preexisting or as a result of their work). Some of our students are in crisis and in need of immediate assistance, while others have an already established relationship with a mental health professional and are seeking to better understand how their work plays a role in their illness. It is common for CF program students to disclose serious and sometimes troubling information about their past or present experiences of trauma.

It is critical that all compassion fatigue educators understand their professional limits, so that they do not cause harm to their students. However, educators are often the first point of contact for people in need of help. This makes it imperative that educators have a sound understanding of and access to mental health professionals who can support their work.

Our compassion fatigue education model

We believe that the most effective, safe, and professional model for compassion fatigue education is based on working partnerships between mental health professionals and compassion fatigue educators, ideally one of whom will have a background in animal-related work (if that's the population being served).

Kate Davis, a licensed clinical veterinary social worker in Oregon, offers individual counseling for animal care professionals through her private practice. Davis partnered with veterinarian Kate Felton, DVM, to create the [Compassion Endurance](#) program, which provides compassion fatigue education to animal care professional groups. She spoke of the benefits of this type of working partnership: "Compassion Fatigue educators naturally encounter people who are struggling with severe distress and who may benefit from contact with a mental health professional. It is essential not only that the CF educator is comfortable with the language of trauma, vicarious trauma, and emotional exhaustion, but that they are also closely aligned with a mental health professional in the process. The alliance between the two professions ideally provides a mutually beneficial source of education, peer support and a wealth of resources to people who are seeking relief from distress and compassion fatigue."

With this in mind, we encourage CF educators to seek out mental health professionals who may be available to provide ongoing or situational support. It may be helpful to reach out to mental health professionals with an interest in animal-related issues, such as veterinary social workers or pet loss specialists.

Within this framework, CF educators and mental health professionals can work together in a number of ways:

Consult during the development of educational materials and curriculum:

Ask a mental health professional for feedback when creating presentations, discussion prompts, and handouts. We typically run ideas past each other to troubleshoot and strengthen our programs and written materials, before we share them with our audiences.

Gather information on how and when to access mental health support:

Invite a mental health professional to speak with participants about how and when to access mental health help. They can address common questions that arise when people are considering therapy, explain how therapy works and why it can be a support, share signs and indicators that reaching out for additional support beyond compassion fatigue education is indicated, and normalize how therapy can be helpful for everyone, even if the stated indicators aren't present.

In my (JD) multi-week online courses, Compassion in Balance and Compassion Fatigue Strategies, Ellen Dolce, LCSW, facilitates a one-hour live call with student to discuss the difference between compassion fatigue and mental health issues, when and how to seek help, and what to do if you are concerned about coworkers or staff members. This affords students the opportunity to consider their own mental health issues, related to and apart from compassion fatigue. Topics such as grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other issues are addressed based on student needs.

If direct participation in an educational setting is not feasible, partner with a mental health professional ahead of time who can offer a framework of how to present this information to your students.

Craft an effective needs assessment:

A needs assessment allows educators to tailor the materials to meet the unique needs of the audience and to identify areas where mental health professionals or other services may be needed. Contact the organization's HR department or leadership to gather information about any insurance benefits available to employees for mental health coverage or employee assistance programs.

Identify referrals for mental health support:

When planning an on-site workshop, it's important to identify local referrals in case someone needs additional help. It's not unusual for workshops to stir up complicated emotions and memories for participants. Before the workshop, reach out to local mental health professionals to assess if they would be an appropriate referral for participants (consider any insurance information gathered during the needs assessment). People may feel uncomfortable asking for this information. Provide a handout with compiled resources to everyone in the room.

Provide ongoing professional supervision and support:

A mental health professional can assist CF educators when they need to debrief after a challenging workshop or provide guidance in how best to respond to requests for help. Participants share serious concerns regarding their mental health with us almost daily. I (JD) regularly consult with mental health professionals to confirm that the advice I'm giving does not cross ethical lines.

Additionally, engaging in CF education often stirs up strong emotions for educators. It's important to have someone to talk with while engaging in this intense work. Having a debriefing partnership with a mental health professional or being in individual therapy are both proactive self-care and mental health strategies for educators to consider.

Finding the right compassion fatigue educator for your organization

If your organization is considering hiring a compassion fatigue educator, you may wish to consider the following questions, with the complexity of your staff's needs in mind:

What are your organization's real needs? The role of a CF educator is to share information to help you and your staff understand what CF is, how it impacts individuals and organizations, and to share strategies at the personal and organizational levels for reducing the impact of CF, including when and how to get professional mental health help, if needed. CF educators aren't there to fix systemic communication problems, low morale, or poor working conditions. However, these issues may be contributing to compassion fatigue and do need to be addressed by management. Before hiring a CF educator, ask yourself if other organizational issues need to be addressed before CF education is appropriate.

What are their qualifications? How many years of experience do they have as a CF educator? How many years have they been working in the animal care profession and in what capacity? What other degrees or certifications do they hold? Do they have references?

What plan do they have in place for students with mental health issues? Do they reach out to local mental health professionals prior to workshops and if so, how will they provide referral information to your staff?

Reflections for compassion fatigue educators

Finally, as more people are moved to help others through compassion fatigue education, it is critical that both future and current CF educators engage in honest self-reflection about their qualifications and motivations for doing this complex work.

We recommend the following reflection questions to help clarify your own mental health needs and how they may impact your work:

- What drew you to CF education work in the first place? Can you identify any commonalities between how you engaged with your work with animals or as a helping professional and how you are currently working to help people with CF?
- What are your own issues with boundaries and how might they impact the CF work you do?
- What, if any, unmet needs do you have that you may be using CF education to meet? It is essential that CF educators be oriented towards the group's needs, rather than to their own self-exploration or healing. For example, do you struggle with the need to "fix" or "save" other people? How might this impact your work as an educator?
- What experiences might students share that are triggering for you? What types of personalities do you find difficult? How will you manage your emotions and reactions when this occurs?
- Who are the mental health professionals that you can reach out to for collegial support?

Honest self-reflection will not only lead to your being able to engage in more ethical and effective work for your students, but will also reduce the amount of harm you may potentially cause to yourself.

Compassion fatigue education is greatly needed in the animal care community. As more people step up to care for their fellow colleagues, and our community of CF educators grows, we hope to see working partnerships between mental health professionals and educators continue to develop. We believe these partnerships help to provide the best quality, most ethical CF services possible. In our experience working together, this model is a safe, effective approach to meeting the complex needs of compassion fatigue and mental health issues for animal care workers.

Please participate in the following two polls!



Compassion Fatigue Education Poll #1

What, if anything, has prevented you from seeking professional mental health help? Check all that apply:

- I don't need it
- I can't afford it.
- My insurance doesn't cover it.
- I can't access quality services in my area.
- I'm uncomfortable asking for help.
- I'm afraid of what other people will think.
- I'm not sure.
- Nothing has stopped me, I've sought help
- Other

Compassion Fatigue Education Poll #2

How do you like to learn? Tell us what kind of format you would prefer for compassion fatigue education. Check all that apply.

- Online, live course (teacher is present)
- Online, self-study course (teacher is not present)
- In person full day workshop
- In person 2-3 hour workshop
- Webinar
- Weekend retreat
- Workbook or books
- Other

Submit

If you feel like you're struggling with compassion fatigue, please visit the [Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project](#) to better understand this normal response to working with animals and people in need, and to learn more about how to manage its impact.

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