

What is Compassion Fatigue?

Tips for identifying and coping with the low points in hoof-care work

By Katie Navarra, Contributing Writer

Missouri farrier Sydney Kotow remembers that one horse, that one case, above all others. Early in Kotow's career, she was asked to work on Flash, a foundered horse. Kotow also holds a Bachelor of Science in equine nutrition and remembers thinking that through her nutrition and farrier expertise she could save the horse, or at least make it more comfortable.

She soon discovered the horse's owner was unwilling to make changes and would not consider euthanasia. The coffin bone rotated and infection set in. Kotow trimmed the horse every 2 weeks until the emotional burden and her own risk of injury became too great. The distress of the tragic case weighed on her. When the client called to say the horse had died, she felt a huge weight lifted.

"We all get that horse that we put every single thing we have into it and it fails," she says. "We think about that case, that horse and how we got fired or how the horse died."

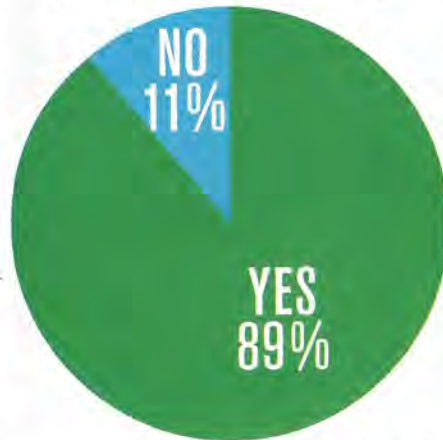
Providing care for someone else's animal can be gratifying, heartbreaking and downright exhausting. Without an awareness of how the emotional highs and lows of the job can affect your long-term well-being, there is always a risk for life getting out of balance.

If you've felt numb to emotions, drained at the end of the day or that you have nothing left to offer, you might be experiencing compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is often talked about among veterinarians and human medical professionals. However, farriers who

must watch an animal suffer, deliver bad news to clients, deal with animal cruelty or watch owners financially struggle to provide proper hoof care can lead to compassion fatigue among farriers too. According to a recent *American Farriers Journal* online poll, 89% say they have experienced symptoms.

"Seeing a horse from a different perspective than the client and knowing from

In your hoof-care work, have you experienced compassion fatigue?



— American Farriers Journal Online Poll

your training that a horse is in pain when not being listened to is trauma," says Colleen Best, a Guelph, Ontario, veterinarian who is the founder and principal of BestVet Coaching and Consulting.

Burnout Vs. Compassion Fatigue

A lot of people say they have compassion fatigue but don't understand what it is and often confuse it with burnout. The

Mayo Clinic defines burnout as, "a special type of work-related stress — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity." Kotow adds that people who get to the point of "not caring," and are "fed up," are burnt out.

A vacation can be a cure for burnout, Best says. On the other hand, compassion fatigue does not go away with time-off. Compassion fatigue is harder to understand because it is not intuitive. Best prefers a decade-old definition developed in nursing literature that states compassion fatigue is, "The final result of a progressive and cumulative process that is caused by prolonged, continuous, and intense contact with patients [and clients], the use of self, and exposure to stress." (Coetzee and Klopfer, 2010)

Trauma plays an important role in compassion fatigue. People often think of trauma as an event such as a car crash or a horrific accident. In a car crash, there is the primary trauma sustained by the individual(s) involved and then there is secondary traumatic stress. Trauma can be any stressful/emotionally laden event, including being a witness to one, Best says.

"Secondary traumatic stress is just like [post-traumatic stress disorder] only you didn't directly experience trauma," says Best, who also holds a PhD in epidemiology. "If I'm driving on the highway and a crash happens four cars ahead of me and I stopped, I can experience the same emotional repercussions even though I wasn't hurt or in the accident myself."

For farriers, examples of secondary traumatic stress can be caring for a horse suffering from prolonged laminitis or neglect. When working with clients, farriers can be exposed to trauma, even if it is secondhand, it can still have repercussions.

"Everyone responds differently," Best says. "We all grieve differently and experience trauma differently, especially based on our background. People push back when hearing the word trauma but any stressful or emotionally laden situation creates trauma."

FARRIER TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Burnout and compassion fatigue are often used interchangeably, but are two different experiences.
- ▶ Trauma, even incidences observed second-hand, can build-up over time and lead to compassion fatigue.
- ▶ Compassion fatigue can be managed through a support network and other strategies.

People often lump burnout and compassion fatigue together, but put another way, Best says burnout is when there is a demand put on you that stretches your resources. When that overextension collides with trauma, the result is compassion fatigue and that is where it's critical to pay attention to yourself and how you respond.

As a society, people are more willing to engage in conversations about mental health and stress today than even just a decade ago. The shifts in society around the human-animal bond have created a higher-stakes environment for those who provide care to animals.

Compounding Compassion Fatigue

Living through traumatic events makes you more sensitive to the effects of trauma in the future, it can be seen as priming in some ways.

"As such, the trauma we are all experiencing as part of the pandemic makes us more sensitive and more likely to be affected by other trauma, such as that

which we may experience when providing care to clients and patients," Best says.

Every person, regardless of their career, has additional stress in their lives because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Most of us are hypervigilant so all the added pressures of COVID-19 make it harder to cope," Best says. "All the hand-sanitizing, masking, thinking about whether the fan is on or off and if it is blowing aerosol on me, etc., add stress."

The state of a person's nervous system affects how they respond to trauma. Because the pandemic added fuel to the nervous system, even the calmest people are closer to the edge than they might normally be. That puts people at higher risk for sticky trauma that builds to compassion fatigue.

Are You Suffering from Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue isn't necessarily one traumatic event, it can be cumulative over time. Best uses the analogy of a frog in boiling water. A frog that can jump out of a pot of boiling water survives.



The emotional highs and lows of caring for a client's horse can take a toll on farriers. The cumulative effect can lead to compassion fatigue.

However, if the frog lives in a pond that is too warm the incompatible environment takes its toll and the frog dies.

"Smaller events are not a tipping point or crisis by themselves but accumulate and can contribute to compassion fatigue over time," Best says.

One of the hallmarks is avoidance behavior, which is when you seek to avoid circumstances that remind you of the traumatic event. This might mean that your



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normal range of emotions has become smaller, or that you avoid certain types of cases or places because they remind you of the trauma.

“There is also re-experiencing, where you remember/have flashbacks of the traumatic experience; these are intrusive experiences that happen when you’re living your normal life,” Best says. “Lastly, arousal. Your level of arousal may be off, you may be hypervigilant or you may be withdrawn. This can manifest as trouble sleeping, working long hours, irritability, gastrointestinal stress or apathy.”

It’s not unusual for those in caregiving roles to experience one or more of those symptoms at some point in their careers. Chances are there are nights you’ve laid awake in bed wondering how a hoof you just resected is doing. Perhaps you’re worrying whether a client is happy with the outcome of recent therapeutic shoeing. A free online self-assessment can provide insight into whether you’re experiencing the generally accepted stress that comes from your job or compassion fatigue. You can find it by visiting the Professional Quality of Life Measure website at proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html.

Managing Compassion Fatigue

There are a couple of essential pieces to managing compassion fatigue. One is having a support system within which you can speak about the upsetting things that happen during the course of your work. It’s not enough just to “vent” about a bad day.

“The individuals you want to support you from a compassion fatigue standpoint are those who listen compassionately, and remain calm, caring and attentive during the conversation,” Best says.

Another strategy is developing mind-body techniques for managing stress. The human body has well-programmed physiologic and neurophysiologic responses to stress. When those triggers occur, stress tends to “stick” with a person.

Mind-body techniques can act as a buffer to the body’s stress responses so that the stressful/traumatic experiences are less likely to affect us in the long term. The mind-body techniques that are specifically helpful are breathing exercises, loving-kindness meditation, relaxation and visualization.

The American Veterinary Medical Association and Substance Abuse and

Mental Health Services Administration, a branch of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, cites these key areas to manage compassion fatigue.


- ▶ Adequate sleep.
- ▶ Good nutrition.
- ▶ Regular physical activity.
- ▶ Active relaxation, such as yoga or meditation.
- ▶ Practicing your spiritual beliefs.

For Kotow, developing a business approach that puts her and her family first has been key to avoiding compassion fatigue. First, she decided to focus her work on clients who are willing to take her advice.

Second, she started charging clients by the hour rather than the job. There is an exception to every rule, but by charging by the hour she has put her business and family first. She also takes Wednesdays off and works until noon on Fridays. **Q**




Katie Navarra is a New York-based freelance writer who draws from her experiences owning and showing horses and interviewing the industry’s leading professionals.



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