



COMPASSION FATIGUE and FIP

By the time we lost a cat to Feline Infectious Peritonitis, most of us had lots of experience with grief and we had survived all these losses more or less gracefully but there is something unique about losing a cat to FIP which caught us completely off guard. Amidst the shock, the tears, and the pain and despite love and support from family and friends, there were times when we felt alone in our grieving and wondered why those around us, those who were involved in our beloved cat's life, especially during his/her final days, can't be more supportive. Sometimes we even felt anger towards them without understanding that perhaps there were hurting as well and suffering from compassion fatigue.

As we start to accept what had happened and embark on our own process of healing, is difficult to think how the treating veterinarian, the people at the rescue group you got your cat from or even the breeder are feeling once those dreaded three letters "FIP" touched their lives. Most likely, we never ask them and we simply assumed they don't understand, they lack empathy, when it is quite possible they are in deep emotional distress.

What is compassion fatigue?

Compassion fatigue is defined as "emotional exhaustion" caused by the stress of caring for traumatized or suffering animals (or people). It can affect physically, mentally and emotionally and normally builds gradually over time causing emotional distress or apathy as a result from the constant demands of caring for sick animals. Compassion fatigue is one of the leading causes of burnout among veterinary professionals and those working or volunteering in animal shelters.

Causes of Compassion Fatigue

- 🐾 Constant exposure to sick animals
- 🐾 Constant exposure to the rescue of animals that have been injured, abandoned, neglected or abused
- 🐾 Often dealing with traumatized and/or grieving pet parents
- 🐾 Often dealing with uninformed public
- 🐾 Constantly being exposed to harsh, painful realities and not being able to talk about what happened and how it feels

Symptoms

- 🐾 Emotional
 - 👂 May feel depressed and want to quit. Feeling stuck in depression
 - 👂 May have sudden outburst of anger
 - 👂 May feel sad, with tears always just below the surface
 - 👂 May feel cynical, numb or hardened, like nothing phases you
 - 👂 May feel like all of the above, switching back and forth

- 🐾 Occupational/Social
 - 🐾 May feel isolated from family and friends
 - 🐾 May have problems relating to co-workers or the public
 - 🐾 May snipe at others, be aggressive, sarcastic, uncooperative
 - 🐾 May notice lower productivity

- 🐾 Physical
 - 🐾 May feel exhausted or ill
 - 🐾 May develop frequent health problems
 - 🐾 May have difficulty sleeping, breathing

- 🐾 Intellectual
 - 🐾 May have difficulty concentrating, making decisions
 - 🐾 Thoughts may race, feeling professionally incompetent or doubting ability to help others

- 🐾 Spiritual
 - 🐾 May feel hopeless or cynical

What helps?

- 🐾 Talk about each of your experiences with enough detail that you can connect emotionally with what you experienced
- 🐾 Acknowledge and safely express your feelings. Find someone you trust, someone who can relate and share what you are experiencing
- 🐾 Brainstorm options and find solutions. Take action.
- 🐾 Take care of yourself. Have fun.
- 🐾 Relaxation techniques, meditation.
- 🐾 Ask for help, attend support groups, speak with a professional

We all grieve differently and the grief process presents in so many different ways, it requires courage to face the pain, rather than run from it until we found peace. No other three letters have more power to strike absolute fear in the hearts of cat lovers than: F, I and P. Those three letters, rips your heart wide open and it is up to each person whether they choose to let grief destroy them or allow it to be transformed into personal growth and expansion. Understanding what others are experiencing, realizing no one is to blame and help them cope with their own pain is something we all can do. Let's allow something good to blossom out of our devastating losses. Let's honor our FIP cats, the love and all the things they brought to our lives by working in partnership to help alleviate the human suffering caused by Feline Infectious Peritonitis.

