

NOVEMBER 2020

# INSIGHT

COMPANION ANIMAL EDITION

IT'S DIABETES MONTH!

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### *Why did you decide to work in veterinary medicine?*

- ▶ I bet no one who's reading this article got into the veterinary profession to euthanize saveable cats.
- ▶ I bet no one took a job in client service because they were looking forward to telling people that they don't qualify for financial help.
- ▶ I would venture to guess that no one went to tech school eager to watch an old dog suffer because its owners believe that a miracle is just around the corner.

And yet, these are the kinds of situations that veterinary professionals find themselves taking part in every single day. Not only do those in vet med witness difficult things regularly – the animal that suffered neglect, the family saying goodbye to a beloved companion, the pet in pain from a terrible accident – but they may also find themselves as active – if unwilling – participants in suffering.

*What impact does this have on professionals who swore to “First, do no harm”?*

# WHEN THE RIGHT CHOICE IS OUT OF REACH MANAGING MORAL DISTRESS

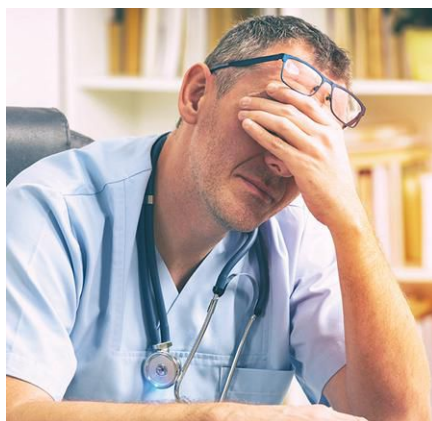
BY KAT OWENS, MSW; KAREN REYNHOUT, DVM; AND JEN LOWRY, DVM, DACVR  
PUBLICATION OF THE VETERINARY SPECIALTY PRACTICE ALLIANCE

That impact is what we call moral distress, or the stress that one feels when they are not able to act in what they consider to be the most moral or correct way. Moral distress is different from compassion fatigue in that, as with the examples above, those experiencing it are not just witnessing the suffering and trauma of others, but they're *contributing* to that suffering, whether through action or inaction. Not because they wish to cause harm, but, most often, because they have no choice.

In any given veterinary encounter, there are multiple needs, perspectives, and interests at play. The needs of the animal are usually our primary consideration as veterinary professionals, but the client has needs as well, and they're ultimately the ones with decision-making power. On top of that, our colleagues may have beliefs and capabilities that are different from our own, the policies or business interests of the practice itself may not always align with our desired course of action, and the law may add yet another set of constraints. Situations inevitably arise in which there is a conflict of interest, but we are obligated to or pressured by those interests to take actions that we otherwise would not have taken. These actions may mean continuing to treat an animal that has no quality of life, keeping silent when a colleague cuts corners, or offering a client a suboptimal treatment plan because the gold standard is financially out of reach. And this doesn't even account for the moral and ethical dilemmas one may face in veterinary medicine, where any choice at all, whether you believe it to

be right or wrong, results in causing some harm.

Given the inevitability of multiple stakeholders and the possibility of moral dilemmas, how can you possibly avoid moral distress? The answer, unfortunately, is that you can't. There are, however, several strategies that can help prepare you to meet the challenges of moral stressors before they happen, and several more



strategies that can help you cope with the effects of those stressors once they've occurred.

The first step in combating moral distress is recognizing when you're experiencing it. Moral distress, like compassion fatigue and burnout, is not a clinical diagnosis, but it *is* a condition above and beyond the everyday stress of your job. Your regular work is likely stressful to some degree (in fact, a little bit of stress – “eustress,” or good stress – is essential to our functioning and growth!), and you may even encounter morally stressful situations that don't cause you to feel abnormally unwell. However, when you start to experience symptoms like persistent

anxiety or frustration; feelings of isolation, apathy, or withdrawal; ongoing somatic complaints like fatigue and illness; or, most importantly, persistent and intrusive thoughts about work, that's when you may be experiencing moral distress.\*

Recognizing and acknowledging your state of mind is essential to addressing your distress, and if you find that moral stressors are impacting your day-to-day life, several strategies may help. One of the best ways to tackle moral distress is to “get it out,” whether that's talking to another person about your experience or processing your thoughts through writing. Dialoguing or journaling through your moral distress is helpful for several reasons. First and foremost, talking or writing about a difficult experience helps move that information from your implicit to your explicit memory. Implicit memories are those that we have no control over (hence the intrusive thoughts characteristic of moral distress), but explicit memories are those only recalled through conscious effort. When you talk or write about your distress, you gain better control over those feelings and memories.

Talking through your stressors – especially if done in a structured way, as in a team debrief or counseling session – also helps alleviate feelings of isolation, and it can help you realign your “moral center” and think about how you (or your team) will address similar moral stressors in the future. You may need to reinforce your professional boundaries, reassess policies or practices in your

*Continued*

workplace, or develop a plan for an appropriate response next time you face a similar situation. Finally, using structured questions to process your distress can help you understand the alternative perspective(s) that led to the action taken; even if you still don't agree with the reasoning behind the decision, simply exploring the other perspective can build empathy, help you gain perspective, and alleviate some of those negative emotions. (See the inset for questions to guide individual or team debriefs.)



#### QUESTIONS TO GUIDE A STRUCTURED DEBRIEF:

1. What about this situation caused me distress?
2. What was the other perspective/ why was the decision made?
3. What went well?  
What will I continue to do?
4. What will I do differently next time?
5. What do I need to accept or release (emotions that are not helpful, things that are outside of your control)?

While responsive coping strategies are useful and necessary when managing moral distress, as medical professionals, you know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Doing things that build your resilience to stressors ahead of time will make coping with those stressors easier when they occur. Focusing on compassion satisfaction (that is, noticing all the *good* you do), identifying and establishing your moral boundaries from the outset, cultivating strong social and professional support networks, and practicing good self-care (the boring kind: eating well, making time for leisure and relationships, attending to your spiritual needs, etc.) are all ways to build resilience against moral distress. These practices also make it easier to access responsive coping strategies: if you've got high compassion satisfaction, it's easier to shift your focus away from individual negative experiences and back to the big picture of your work; if you've got a strong support network, it's easier to find people with whom to have a productive and empathetic dialogue; and so on.

One practice that is both a fantastic proactive, *and* responsive strategy for addressing moral distress is

mindfulness. You may think that mindfulness is just a feel-good buzzword, but the truth is that mindfulness has some strong research pointing to benefits like improved focus, better emotional regulation, and even physical benefits like lower blood pressure and better sleep. Proactive, regular mindfulness practice can help us “keep our head” during stressful situations, leaving us better equipped to problem solve, regulate, and process our emotions. Used responsively as a coping tool, mindfulness can help us rein in our intrusive thoughts, get back in touch with the present moment, and refocus our perspective on what's important.

While it may be disheartening to realize that, as a veterinary professional, encountering some degree of moral distress is inevitable, it's encouraging to know that conversations around wellness and support are growing. Your voice is an important part of that conversation: Check in on one another. Speak up when you don't feel right. And recognize that you deserve as much compassion as you give to everyone else. ■

\*It should be noted that many of these symptoms are similar to compassion fatigue and burnout, and may also be indicative of more serious physical or mental health issues such as depression, so please seek medical or professional help if needed.