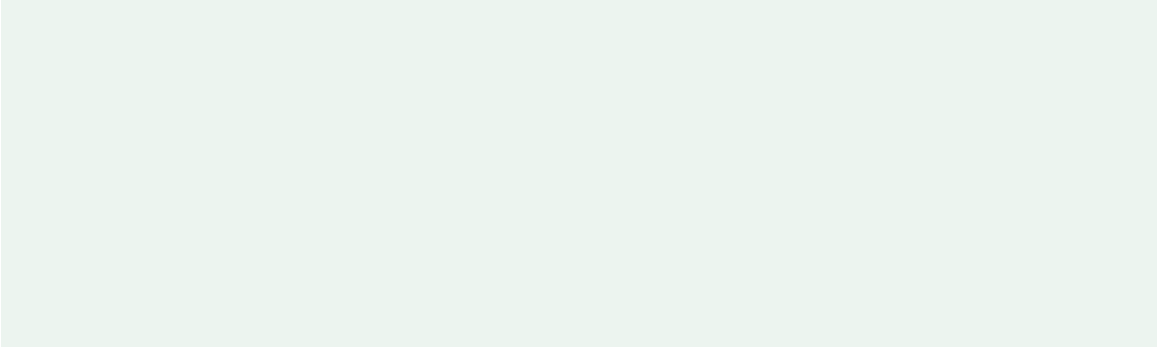




KNOWING RIGHT VS. DOING RIGHT: DEALING WITH MORAL DISTRESS

KAT OWENS, MSW • VETERINARY SOCIAL WORKER, UPSTATE VETERINARY SPECIALTIES



1



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define moral distress and identify its causes and symptoms
- Distinguish between burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral distress, and understand how they are related
- Identify proactive and responsive strategies to mitigate the effects of moral distress
- Create a plan to address a specific stressor in your own life

2



A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MYSELF...

- MSW, University of Denver
- Certificate in animal-assisted social work, Institute for the Human-Animal Connection
- Prior work in residential and day treatment, education, and human medicine
- Developed trauma-informed education program, including training on self-care



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WHAT IS MORAL DISTRESS?

- Not being able to act in what you perceive to be the most moral way
- May be conflict between needs or demands of :
 - Animal
 - Owner
 - Colleagues/business
 - Policy or law
 - Industry norms
 - Your own morals, values, beliefs, or capacities

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CAUSES OF MORAL DISTRESS

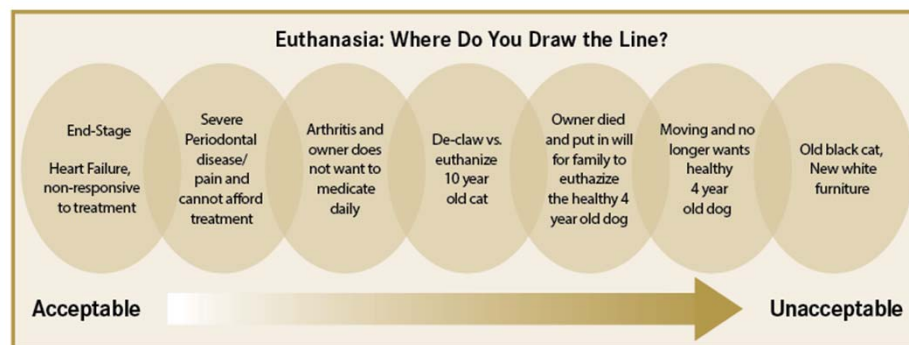


- Obligation or pressure from others
- Doing, failing to prevent, or witnessing act
- Moral dilemmas
- Crescendo effect
- Behavioral drift
- Subjectivity

5



CAUSES OF MORAL DISTRESS



Veterinarian's Money Digest, July 8, 2018.

6



EXAMPLES OF MORAL DISTRESS

- Convenience euthanasia
- Continuing to treat an animal with poor quality of life
- Denying a client a payment plan due to practice policy
- Coworker reusing IV lines
 - Even small conflicts can add up!

7



DISCUSSION

- What moral stressors do you encounter in your work?



8



SYMPTOMS OF MORAL DISTRESS



- Intrusive, negative thoughts or emotions about your work
- Anxiety
- Guilt and shame
- Feeling of isolation
- Frustration and helplessness
- Apathy and disengagement
- Fatigue and other somatic complaints



COMPASSION FATIGUE AND BURNOUT

- Compassion fatigue: secondary traumatization due to repeated exposure to traumatic events or cases
 - i.e.: giving a terminal diagnosis to a very young animal; euthanizing multiple animals in the span of a short time; feeling deeply disturbed after treating an abused animal
- Burnout: excessive stress due to job demands and conditions
 - i.e.: staying late every night to complete paperwork; taking on extra duties when short-staffed; working with unsupportive leadership



MAKING A DISTINCTION

- Shared symptoms
 - Exhaustion, apathy, disengagement
 - Anxiety or dread
 - Somatic complaints
- Burnout: external stress, rooted in workplace
- Compassion fatigue: source of trauma is external
- Moral distress: source of trauma is internal



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MORAL DISTRESS VS. COMPASSION FATIGUE

- Both are linked to nature of work
- Similar symptoms: intrusive, persistent, disruptive thoughts
- Gray area and overlap
 - Compassion doesn't exist outside of moral judgment
- Identify the source of your distress
 - Many strategies are the same

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PREVENTING MORAL DISTRESS



- Protective factors
 - High compassion satisfaction
 - Strong support network
 - Good self-care practices
- Boundaries
- Dialogue at work
- Moral awareness and conflict resolution training

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A MORAL OBLIGATION TO SELF-CARE

- *You will not be good at your job without taking care of yourself!*
- “A moral imperative”
- Prioritize your time
- Be accountable!



University of Buffalo School of Social Work

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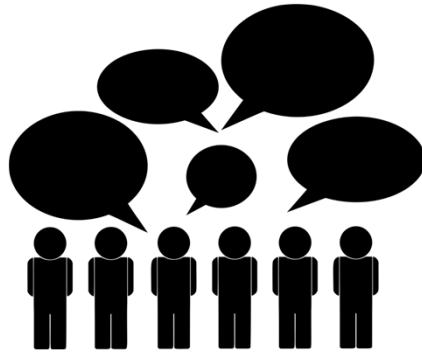
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DISCUSSION

- How do you prioritize or incorporate self-care into your life?



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RESPONDING TO MORAL DISTRESS: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

- Take inventory: identify what's causing you harm
- Dialogue/debrief*
- Journal
- Assess and reinforce boundaries
- Mindfulness practice
- Formal counselling



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RESPONDING TO MORAL DISTRESS: DEBRIEF

- What about this situation caused me distress?
- What was the other perspective/why was the decision made?
- What went well?
- What will I do differently next time?
- What do I need to release?

17



RESPONDING TO MORAL DISTRESS: COGNITIVE STRATEGIES



- Expand possibility of moral decisions
 - Practice empathy!
- Remember big picture
- Identify the lesson
 - Not necessary to repeat behavior
- Catch and release your emotions
- Self-compassion

18



ACTION PLAN


- Identify 1-2 stressors you experience in your work
 - Is this stressor related to compassion fatigue, moral distress, or burnout?



ACTION PLAN


- Identify how you will respond to this stressor in the future *or* how you will process the stress that happened
 - Be specific: who, what, when, how
 - When ____, I will ____.





ACTION PLAN

- Identify one self-care habit you will practice
 - When will you do it?
 - How will you protect your time?




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ACTION PLAN

- Commit!
 - Write it down
 - Choose an accountability method



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QUESTIONS?



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