

Template for a workshop on emotional labour/compassion fatigue

This is a template for a basic 90-minute workshop, which can be made longer by including more than one case study session and/or increasing the lengths of the talks. Cabaret-style tables work best for encouraging open discussions and for breakout group work. For best results, adapt it to your own country and establishment, tailoring it to address any specific themes that may apply to the establishment's staff and work. There are some example sides on page 3 and hypothetical case studies on page 5. We are happy for you to share this resource.

Background

It is now widely recognised that animal technologists, scientists, lab animal vets, students and Animal Ethics Committee members can all experience internal conflict and emotional distress due to some aspects of their respective roles. Examples include euthanasing animals, either as part of a project or because they are surplus to requirements, using animals in science, and caring for animals who are experiencing adverse effects. It can be difficult to seek support from family and friends, especially if they do not understand why animals are used, or may be against animal experiments.

Experiencing difficult and often conflicting feelings around working with animals in science, and the emotional labour involved can lead to stress and 'compassion fatigue', potentially leading to burnout. This may be expressed as physical tiredness, emotional exhaustion, anxiety or depression. It can also lead to absenteeism and poor performance, with consequences for the person who is suffering, their colleagues, and the animals in their care. This workshop will enable staff to acknowledge and discuss their feelings in a safe and supportive environment, and to identify appropriate individual coping strategies. It will also enable the establishment to find out more about the needs of its staff, and how to ensure these are met.

Time (min)	Topic/activity
5	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set out the aims of the workshop, as in the background above. You could use materials from the 3Rs Collaborative as a basis for describing emotional labour, its causes and consequences. Make it clear that this is a 'safe space' and all interactive elements will be completely anonymous. Using a polling tool such as Slido or Menti, ask participants to input three words (separately) that describe some of the feelings they are struggling with, to create a word cloud.
10	<p>Presentation: The 'caring for staff' element of the Culture of Care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefly describe the Culture of Care and the focus on the element of caring for staff (see norecopa.no/coc). You could relate it to functions of your local Animal Ethics Committee, e.g. the UK Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB), the EU Animal Welfare Body or Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. Two UK AWERB tasks are helping to promote a Culture of Care and supporting staff dealing with animals on animal welfare, ethical issues and training (see sections 3 and 8 in the RSPCA/LASA guiding principles on good practice for AWERBs). Example slides 1 to 4 below are taken from a workshop in the UK but could easily be adapted for other countries.

15	<p>Discussion Enable participants to express their views, and ask questions, before moving on to the case studies.</p>
20	<p>Case studies in groups (around 6 people works well)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have found case study discussion to be very helpful in drawing out people’s feelings and concerns. You can see some examples at the end of this template, all of which are hypothetical - this is very important. However, it is a good idea to make the cases relevant to the species and procedures used at the establishment, or to common themes, if this can be done without breaking confidences or causing discomfort to any of the group. ● We usually create three or four, then allow each group to choose which one they do (we don’t think it matters if every group chooses the same scenario). Ask each group to nominate someone to briefly summarise the outcome in the next session.
20	<p>Feedback and discussion If you successfully created a safe space, you can expect a very open discussion which can be emotional. Make sure that the facilitators are able to cope with this and bring the discussion to an end on a positive note. A pre-session brief, and post-session debrief, may be helpful.</p>
10	<p>Resources to help with emotional labour and coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use a polling tool to ask: ‘What do you do, to cope with stress and emotional labour?’ with free text. ● Explain the available resources to help, both internal (e.g. Mental Health First Aiders) and external (e.g. 3Rs Collaborative, Institute of Animal Technology in the UK). See example slides 5 and 6.
10	<p>Wrap up and action points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use the polling tool to ask: ‘What will you do differently?’ and ‘What would you like [your establishment] to do, to better support you?’ (also free text). ● Make sure you save these and follow them up

Example slides

1

What's in place for you?

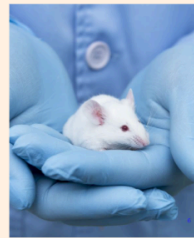
- A supportive environment in which you feel you can openly discuss any issues you are having, with opportunities to do this?
- Acknowledgement of 'compassion fatigue' and pathways to institutional support if you need it?
- Access to information produced by external bodies
 - e.g. NA3RSc, IAT?
- Changes to practice if needed
 - e.g. around humane killing, enabling refinement, staffing?



2

What could you do?

- Ask how the AWERB is fulfilling the Culture of Care function
 - This should involve specific activities and leadership
- Ask for this to be discussed/on the agenda
- Support its initiatives
- Make sure there is input from animal technologists
- Share resources
- Tell someone if you are struggling



3

Support from the AWERB could take the form of:

- Ensuring **training and resources** for all roles and responsibilities to be discharged properly
 - e.g. people with multiple NP roles, NIOs
- Recognising and addressing **compassion fatigue**
- Ensuring that **input from techs and NPs** is properly discussed and issues addressed, either within the AWERB or in themed meetings with wider attendance
- Making sure your voices are **heard**



4

Points to consider

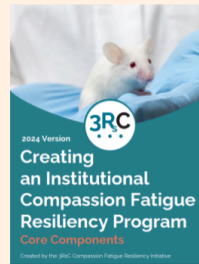
- What does your AWERB do regarding **training and support**? How could you find out?
- Do you feel supported if you have concerns, or suggestions, around the **3Rs**?
- Are there **good communication channels** in place for you?
- Are you able to access all the **training and CPD** you would like to?
- If you are a named person, do you have the **information, support and resources** to fulfil your role(s)?



5

What else can establishments do?

- Signpost compassion fatigue/mental health resources
- Create an open atmosphere where staff can ask for help
- Encourage breaks, social support, self-care
- Communicate value of human-animal bond
- Support for animal welfare/3Rs
- Quiet spaces for reflection
- Rotate difficult tasks among personnel
- Ask staff what they need!



3rc.org/compassion-fatigue/institutional-resources/

6

Looking after your compassion

- The emotional connection you feel when you care can be easily damaged. We need to look after it
- Keep a check on what is usual for you. If you are:
 - Not sleeping
 - Constantly on edge
 - Can't put your animals out of your mind
 - Waking up thinking about stress at work
 - Using unhealthy coping strategies
- Take steps to support yourself
 - Non-negotiables of self-care – e.g. enough sleep, eating well



Hypothetical case studies

1. Humane killing (physical methods)

You have been in post as a junior technician in a university laboratory for about 2 years. Although you still dislike having to kill the animals, you now feel that you are competent in killing mice and rats using carbon dioxide, which is the approved method in your establishment. This morning, during your team meeting, you are advised that your lab will be moving away from carbon dioxide inhalation and instead switching to a physical method (cervical dislocation) for killing rodents. This change will be effective immediately and all staff who need a refresher will be trained in physical methods over the next week. You are told that this method is quicker than the anaesthetic and more humane for the animal, which should be everyone's priority.

After the meeting, you feel slightly panicked as you've only done cervical dislocation a few times when training to be an animal technician, and to be honest, you hated doing it. You understand that it is better for the animal but it feels very brutal to you. When you try to talk about it with your colleagues, they all seem to be okay with this change and tell you that if this is quicker and more humane, then there is no question that it is the preferable method.

You go home that evening and can't shake the dread of having to perform cervical dislocation every time you have to kill an animal from now on. You struggle to fall asleep that night and wonder whether this means you are a 'bad' animal technician for worrying about your own experience of killing rather than thinking only of the animal's welfare. Perhaps you're just not up to this job and you should quit?

- What in this scenario resonates with your own experiences?
- Was good care provided here? For whom? Is there sometimes tension between caring for animals and caring for people?
- What do you think could have been done differently in this situation?

2. Family fall out

One day, you come home feeling particularly upset after the vet team had to euthanase several animals you had cared for over the course of a long study. You felt a real bond with them, and the procedure - though carried out humanely - hit you harder than usual. Your family notices something's off and asks what's wrong. You try to be honest. You try to be open, explaining that some animals had been euthanased and that it had been a difficult day emotionally. One family member quickly shuts the conversation down, saying, "I don't want to hear about that - it's too upsetting." Another says, "I don't know how you can do that job. It's just wrong. Animals shouldn't be used for research at all." You're left feeling judged, misunderstood, and alone. It's not the first time you've experienced this kind of reaction.

You start to feel isolated - like there's a barrier between your work life and your personal life. You care deeply about animals, and your job is an extension of that, but to others, it looks like the opposite. It's hard to explain the emotional complexity of the work, especially the bond you form with the animals and how hard it can be when they're euthanased. It feels like there's no safe space to talk about the emotional toll. You wonder if you should just stop talking about work altogether. But bottling it up makes things worse.

- What role should workplaces play in helping staff deal with emotional isolation?
- What advice would you give to someone who feels they can't talk about their work with the people closest to them?
- Have you ever spoken to your family about your work? What do they think?

For more ideas, see the [Care-full Stories](#) interactive training resource, developed by the Animal Research Nexus - the various scenarios are really useful discussion tools to help enable mutual understanding and better communication within a Culture of Care. They can be used as they are or adapted into case studies.

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