

Compassion Fatigue and Stress



Crampton Consulting Group

P: +61 7 3621 6005

E: ccgenquiries@provet.com.au

W: www.ProvetCCG.com.au



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Published by:

Crampton Consulting Group

Locked Bag 1003

Northgate QLD 4013

Written by

Rosie Overfield VN, Dip Prof. Counselling

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that no other profession suffers as much as the veterinary industry. The constant exposure to euthanasia, seemingly uncaring pet owners and the abuse and suffering of animals can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is not stress or burnout, but these may become side effects. These can also be known as secondary trauma and are considered negative events.¹ Stress can be another aspect of an unhappy work environment. Heavy workload; dealing with angry, frustrated or impatient clients; handling money issues; being confronted with an aggressive dog, all these things and more can cause your mind and body to become stressed.

Within the pages of this eBook, our aim is to give you an understanding of compassion fatigue and stress within your specific work environment. We encourage you to read through all the pages, even more so if you believe you may be experiencing either of these aspects. Take part in our self-reflection exercises and practical suggestions for a definite improvement!



UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE – PART 1 ⁱⁱ

When veterinary professionals are asked why they do their jobs, the overwhelming response is “because I want to help animals”. Veterinary nursing is often more than just a career – it’s a deep-seated calling which starts at a young age. It attracts those caring and compassionate individuals who want to help alleviate the suffering and hurt of animals. Because of the nature of the veterinary profession, caring and compassionate individuals can be exposed to traumatic situations such as animal abuse, neglect, frequent euthanasia and the complexities of angry and grieving pet owners. It is precisely this desire to care that makes all veterinary nurses susceptible to compassion fatigue. We engage in emotionally intense work, and in doing so often give at a cost to ourselves. It is this ‘cost of caring’ which is known as compassion fatigue. In this two part series, we will look at the ‘anatomy’ of compassion stress and fatigue, how Australian veterinary nurses feel about their role and their ability to care for themselves, and then finally, the strategies and tools for self-care for both individuals and veterinary teams.

As a recognised psychological condition, compassion fatigue can affect anyone who engages in emotionally intense work and is exposed to the suffering of others. Studies confirm that the veterinary industry is not immune to compassion fatigue; in fact, the Humane Society of America states that almost two thirds of animal care workers have experienced compassion fatigue in their career. Compassion fatigue can harden the most diligent animal lover and some veterinary nurses are driven out of the industry entirely. In veterinary teams, compassion fatigue can erode culture and profitability through increased absenteeism, negative changes in employee relationships, lack of empathy towards clients, paranoia and uncontrollable complaining and gossiping. Each one of us can experience compassion stress and fatigue differently, and our ability to protect ourselves will vary. What we do know is that it is normal to be affected by the work we do.

SO, WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Compassion fatigue can be best described as an emotional and physical exhaustion. It can be triggered by an individual event, such as exposure to a cruelty case, or by chronic exposure to stressors in the veterinary practice. It can also be termed ‘vicarious trauma’ as we often see, feel or hear the story of the trauma patient, its owner or a colleague. This could be a cat dying in your arms, a client telling you about their dog being hit by a car, or comforting a sobbing colleague over the death of a patient. Compassion stress and fatigue emerges from a complex set of toxic circumstances coupled with an animal carer’s need to help. “Helping” i.e. working in a veterinary practice, sets the scene by exposing us to trauma. External factors such as home life, relationships, frequency of exposure to trauma and our own self-awareness can also impact our susceptibility to compassion fatigue.

Ultimately, veterinary nurses can experience an impaired ability to feel empathy towards their patients, co-workers and even family members. The overwhelming sense of responsibility to our patients and their owners can feel exaggerated and out of balance. Because of this devotion to the cause, veterinary professionals can lose their ability to see good in the world.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Each person will have their own individual experience with compassion fatigue. Below are some examples.

Physical Symptoms

- Exhaustion
- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Increased susceptibility to illness
- back ache from an overactive adrenal gland
- Disinterest in taking care of physical appearance
- Not prioritising health or doing the things that help keep us balanced

Behavioural Symptoms

- Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs
- Dread of working with certain clients/patients
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Absenteeism – missing work, taking many sick days
- Increased injuries
- Forgetfulness
- Low tolerance of work colleagues – no trust, paranoia
- Withdrawal from family, friends and social events
- Changed reactions in home environment - disinterest in intimacy, feeling stressed all the time and having little tolerance for our partners, children and those close to us

Psychological and Emotional Symptoms

- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy
- Anger and irritability
- Intrusive imagery or dissociation
- Hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional material
- Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients/patients
- Diminished sense of enjoyment of career
- Disruption to world view, heightened anxiety or irrational fears
- Dread of working with certain clients/patients
- Cynicism
- Distancing and depression
- Inability to tolerate procedures i.e. euthanasia, when previously coped well

Compassion fatigue is not a professional death sentence. It is possible to cope and it is possible to heal from chronic compassion fatigue before we experience complete burnout. It is possible to experience 'compassion satisfaction' and adopt meaningful self-care practices to protect ourselves and our chosen career.

UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION FATIGUE – PART 2 ⁱⁱⁱ

There has been much debate amongst compassion fatigue researchers as to whether the term ‘prevention’ is appropriate. Many believe that it is impossible to prevent compassion fatigue completely, meaning it is near impossible to work in the veterinary field and not be impacted by the stories you hear and the work you do. However, can compassion fatigue be *treated, mitigated or transformed*? Yes, it can.

Compassion fatigue can be transformed on three key levels – professional, practice and personal.

PROFESSIONAL AND PRACTICE STRATEGIES

There are many simple strategies that can be employed within the veterinary practice to protect the team from compassion fatigue. Simply fostering an open dialogue and acknowledging that compassion fatigue occurs can help normalise it. Additionally, veterinary practices can implement open discussion during the new employee induction phase. This is the best time to show new staff that it’s normal to have bad days, it’s normal to be affected by certain cases and that it is normal to put your hand up and say ‘I’m not okay’. A speaker at a compassion fatigue accreditation course in Canada several years back used an interesting term saying that nurses “eat their young”. This can be so true. We don’t always support and foster young ‘newbie’ nurses. We don’t always give them permission to come to us and talk. We throw them in the deep end and figure the strong will survive. In reality, we should be creating support networks for all staff, encouraging regular breaks, using appropriate debriefing techniques and making regular check-in times.

Within teams it is also easy to ‘slime’ each other with stories from our work with clients and patients. Francoise Mathieu, a compassion fatigue specialist, describes ‘sliming’ as the action of traumatising our colleagues without their consent. In part 1, we highlighted the Vicarious Trauma as the ‘imagined participation’ when someone is telling a traumatic story. We take on board the sensations of the event and often have an emotional response ourselves. So how do we support our peers and debrief properly? Informal debriefing or ‘Low Impact Debriefing’ is more about immediacy. We may see a cruelty case and need to informally talk to someone. This is okay, but we must ensure we don’t also traumatise the person we are telling. Low impact debriefing involves first ‘fair warning’ and ‘consent’. ^{iv} You need to ensure the person is prepared to hear the information by saying “I need to talk to you about xyz. It’s a pretty gory story. Is that okay and is this a good time?” Start with the least traumatic parts of the story first. It’s all about avoiding the slime!

More formal debriefing can also be implemented in veterinary practices. This is usually conducted by a manager and can be done one-on-one or in groups. This can be useful should the practice ‘survive’ a particularly aggressive or violent client outburst. Formal debriefing can:

- help the participants understand the relationship between the event and their reactions
- provide an opportunity for cathartic release of feelings, thoughts, and emotions as needed
- identify successful coping strategies
- promote the various support systems available to the staff member ^v

Crisis debriefing is not counselling or therapy; rather, an organised, group education process that encourages self-disclosure. Participation is always voluntary. Consider the activities in the box below and ascertain whether this process can be implemented within your practice.

Five-Stage Crisis Debriefing Model

Stage	Purpose	Activities
1	Reviewing the event	Ask the team member to describe the sight, sounds, smell and physical sensations they experienced at the time. Collectively the team can construct a comprehensive description of what happened and why
2	Reviewing reactions	Ask the team to describe their reactions – including <u>behaviour</u> and emotions felt, and that of the client
3	Coping and resilience	Ask the team to describe their strategies for coping with the above information. Team leader can add in suggestions here.
4	Constructing healing theories	Ask the staff member to re-describe the event and the aftermath considering what they have learnt through discussion. Focus on resilience and growth.
5	Re-engagement	Have the staff member describe how they anticipate getting 'back to work'

Adapted from Charles R. Figley, 2001

PERSONAL STRATEGIES

Whilst it seems obvious, improved self-care practices are the cornerstone of mitigating compassion fatigue. Unfortunately, it is our compassionate nature that often sees us putting our own needs last and feeling guilty if we take time for ourselves. In a recent survey, 84.6% of participants agreed that self-care practices were important, however 78.1% of respondents did not check themselves for stress on a daily basis. So the first step is to take stock. How are you feeling right now? Do you ever stop to listen to your mind and your body? Mindfulness and self-awareness are essential tools to assessing your well-being.

Self-care is actually deceptively simple but each one of us is different. You have to decide what is right for you. What has been shown to work are the “ABC’s” such as adequate sleep, rest periods, healthy diet, regular exercise and regular holidays away from work and technology. It is amazing how much money people will invest in self-help literature and expensive classes yet avoid paying attention to the simple strategies of good nutritious food and quiet time. Activities that replenish you are also important. For some people this is creative endeavours, sports, visiting family or simply

having a massage. The important part is doing something that makes you feel balanced. Give yourself permission to do *something* renewing every day.

Another key self-care practice is to manage your 'trauma inputs' outside of work. We know we see enough trauma during the working day! Trauma inputs are such things as unhealthy images, stories and activities that we absorb. Think about a typical day. Do you start it by watching the news, listening to the radio or reading the paper or stories on the internet? Note how many disturbing images and stories you absorb. Does this exposure continue after the working day too? Whilst we're not suggesting you refrain from keeping current with world events, it is important to understand that we do absorb large amounts of traumatic information within a 24-hour period. Think about how you spend your free time – is it contributing to or hindering your ability to self-care? Additionally, consider your transition from work to home. Do you find yourself stuck in traffic for an hour and irritable when you walk through the door? Are you immediately greeted by pets, children or your partner and barely have a second to breathe? How you 'transition' mentally and physically from your workplace can be important. For some nurses, a shower and changing their clothes immediately helps them become calm. For others, it is a karaoke session in the car or a walk around the garden as soon as they get home. A transition ritual can support you to step out of a stressful day, re-frame your thinking, and arrive home able to engage in some self-care and healthy relationships with those you love.

Compassion fatigue often robs us of the desire to engage in hobbies and activities we previously had enjoyed. Sometimes it is important to learn to say 'yes' or 'no' to opportunities and activities. We can often fall into the 'all or nothing' trap with hobbies. Consider the example of Sally, she said that working on Saturdays had taken away her weekly golfing day. She felt she had had to "give up her favourite thing". After talking about it with another experienced nurse, it was suggested she didn't have to be 'all or nothing' about golf. Rather, she could spend just an hour or two at the driving range on a weeknight to reclaim some time for herself. All too often we can give up what we love because we can't do it in the same way as we have previously. A bit of creative thinking can go a long way to re-installing hobbies and renewing activities.

"...your warning signs are your strategies which are your solutions"

Francoise Mathieu

Veterinary nurses who develop an early-warning system for compassion fatigue are the most likely to overcome its grasp. Francoise Mathieu simply calls it 'Scaling My Red Zone' ^{vi}. If green is your healthy self, what represents yellow and what represents red? For example, when you are in the green zone you talk to your neighbours. When you're in the yellow zone, you avoid your neighbours (warning sign!) and when you are in the red zone you hide from your neighbours. What does your yellow, or caution zone look like? Are you self-aware? We'll look more into this aspect on the following pages.

Compassion fatigue exists on a continuum throughout our career. It amplifies and diminishes based on our current life circumstances, our working conditions and the nature of the work we do. As mentioned earlier, self-care strategies that have been shown to work are deceptively simple. The real test is whether we are prepared to make a commitment to change. How many times have we seen a fantastic looking runner glide past and thought "I really should get in shape"? Thinking is not the same as acting.

- Thoughts and beliefs which contribute to compassion fatigue
- I tend to love and care for animals first, and neglect myself
- It makes me uncomfortable or even feel like a failure when I can't keep every patient alive or solve their problems

- Nobody else could do my job quite as good or as thoroughly as I do, or care enough to do it – I must do it all
- It's a lot easier for me to focus all my energy on helping the patients, than facing my own issues or areas for healing
- I find it really hard to leave the clinic at the end of the day when I know patients are staying over
- I get really upset and angry when a colleague doesn't bend over backwards for each and every patient
- I feel good about myself when all my time is spent looking after others
- I spend a lot of my time away from work thinking about patients and what's happening to them
- Sometimes I am happier when an owner elects for euthanasia over treatment – it's better than the animal going home with irresponsible owners

Just as certain thoughts contribute to compassion fatigue, auditing can also provide us with a 'self-check' that the sometimes painful work, clients and industry are not clouding our abilities to see ourselves and our abilities realistically. Look at the statements below and use them to gauge your personal thoughts and beliefs. Unlike the previous exercise, these statements contribute to preserving emotional health.

HELPFUL THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS

These can prevent and heal compassion fatigue:

- I care for and love the animals very much, but I also am pretty good at looking after myself
- I try to comfort patients, giving them love and compassion but I do my best not to take their pain on as my own
- I believe I can make a difference in the lives of my patients. At times it is sad and frustrating work, but I can still find some satisfaction. I know some problems are bigger than me, but it does feel good to be part of the solution
- I am proud of my skills and contribution to animal care, but I know I am not the only person who can help
- I love to care for animals, but I take note of my own issues and feelings which need processing and healing too
- I respect my colleague's way of nursing the patients in our care
- My self-value comes from how well I look after my patients

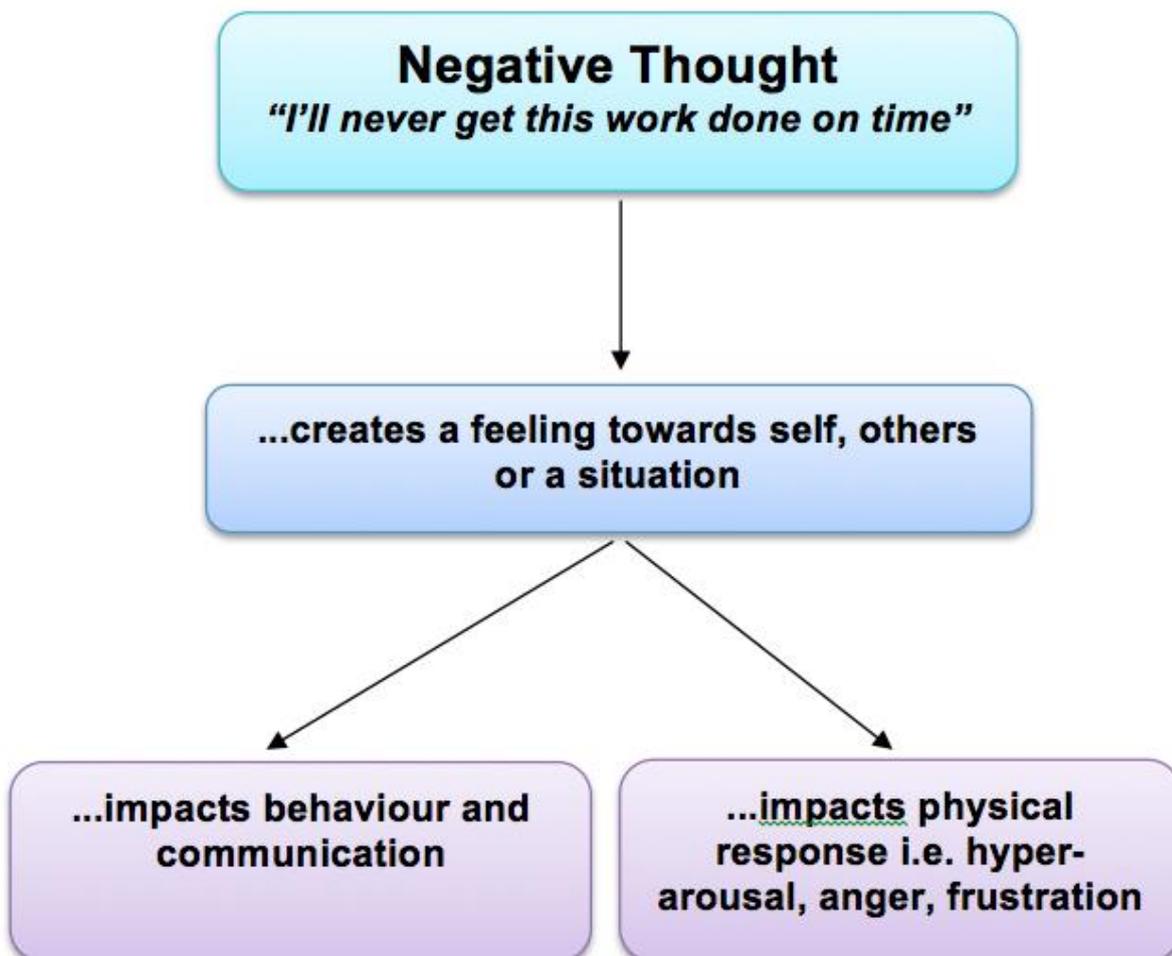
UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF STRESS

Stress can be defined as the body's natural response to fear. It is what we experience mentally, physically and emotionally. If someone or something scares us or pressures us, our body often convinces us we are 'under attack'. Each one of us is susceptible to stress in different ways. Our susceptibility can be influenced by genes, environment, lifestyle, work and a history of trauma in our lives. Long-term stressful situations can produce residual stress, meaning that it never goes away. This can wear out the body's reserves, leave a person feeling depleted or overwhelmed, weaken the body's immune system, and cause various other problems.

Each day we experience physical manifestations of our own thoughts and beliefs. Think back to the last time you saw a client you didn't 'click' with. Do you remember what happened? To avoid burnout, it is important that each of us 'learn' how to handle ourselves when we face frustration or conflict.

In cognitive behavioural therapy, therapists assist clients to understand how their thoughts impact their mind and body.

Consider the diagram below:



Stress is often a feeling that arises based on a particular event. When our body convinces us we are 'under attack', it automatically responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The **hypothalamus** signals the **adrenal glands** to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. The stress response, also known as 'fight or flight', is of great use in critical situations such as slamming on the brakes to avoid an accident. It's also useful in less dangerous situations that also require critical thinking such as delivering a speech or sitting an exam. Being nervous is okay.

Unfortunately, stress doesn't always happen in response to things that are immediate or that are over quickly. Ongoing or long-term events or feelings can cause stress too. This includes remembering a traumatic event in the veterinary practice or being physically assaulted by a client. Commonly, it can be the feeling of 'overwhelm' at the ongoing workload.

Long-term stressful situations can produce residual stress, meaning that it never goes away. The body is constantly in a hyper-arousal state. The nervous system senses continued pressure and may remain slightly activated and continue to pump out extra stress hormones over an extended period. This can wear out the body's reserves, leave a person feeling depleted or overwhelmed, weaken the body's immune system, and cause other problems. This is often why we cannot shake a cold, may experience headaches or insomnia and learn to live with adrenal fatigue which, amongst other things, can cause backache.

WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS

When we think about the signs and symptoms of stress, there is often an early warning sign that things are 'not right'. Think of your state of being as a scale:



It is often in the yellow zone that we have the most power to be self-aware and self-regulatory.

Think about the last time you ended up in the 'red zone'. Were there any early warning signs that occurred?

PERSONAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH STRESS

Recognising your triggers is half the battle, the other half is learning how to mentally self-regulate to avoid being at the effect of extreme emotion. If you find yourself in a situation that causes you stress, consider these strategies for staying in control:

- Deep breathing: the deeper breaths you can take the more oxygenated red blood cells enter the brain and calm the fight-or-flight response.
- Force yourself not to respond immediately: if you are concerned that you may say something you will regret, buy yourself some time. Examples include, "Can I get back to you about that?" or "Can we talk about this at a later time?"

- Take a walk: studies show that going outside and gaining a different perspective immediately moderates strong emotion.
- Use imagery for immediate relaxation: imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as safe, peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. Use this as a retreat from stress and pressure.

PROFESSIONAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH STRESS

We all get stressed at work. It is normal. To maintain a professional approach, consider these strategies for coping with stress in your workplace. You will find strategies for dealing with stress and compassion fatigue often follow the same path.

- Simply fostering an open dialogue and acknowledging that stress and anxiety occurs can help normalise it. Staff should know that it's normal to have bad days; it's normal to be affected by certain cases; and, it's normal to put your hand up and say, "I'm not okay." Having someone to talk to will immediately lessen the burden of an issue.
- Know when to say, 'I'm not coping with my workload.' It is important to also demonstrate openness with yourself regarding your role and responsibilities. Be mindful of your work style and how you are best productive. This can be as simple as quickly sitting down with a manager and asking, "How best do I prioritise these tasks?"
- Avoid 'sliming' each other with stressful stories. When we share these stories, our colleagues 'join in' on the emotional journey. You need to ensure the person is prepared to hear the story by saying "I need to talk to you about xyz. It's a pretty full-on story. Is that okay and is this a good time?" Let the listener choose.
- Develop standards of care for each other in stressful times. What shouldn't be tolerated in teams is long-term, negative stressed behaviour such as rudeness or lack of communication. Within the team, it is important to share information about each other relating to stress. What are your warning signs? How can your colleagues support you when they see them? Develop a 'standard of care' which you all commit to in supporting each other.
- Celebrate when things go right. In the day to day communications of the business, we spend a greater amount of time focusing on what is not working, rather than what is. Share positive client feedback, thank-you cards, successful project outcomes and personal achievements.
- We must remember that each one of us is susceptible to stress in different ways. By gaining a greater understanding of your own warning signs for stress and coping mechanisms to overcome this, you will be well on your way to successful stress management.

Another aspect in stress and compassion fatigue management is a great concept known as a Team Wellness Program. In recent times the corporate world has seen huge benefits in developing wellness programs for staff. In an often physically and emotionally demanding industry like veterinary care, we'd be wise to ask ourselves, what are we doing to support our valuable teams?

TEAM WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The focus of wellness programs in the veterinary industry has inherently revolved around the pets we care for. Principally, this has been to ensure early detection of illness and to bond the clients and their pets to the practice.

It has been proven time and time again that a healthy workplace pays dividends for any employer. This year (2012) Google was voted 'No. 1 Employer of Choice' in Australia, and No. 4 in the US. Why was that? An article published by HR Leader entitled 'Growing the Google Talent Machine'^{vii}, suggests the success of Google largely rests on its unique culture and creative employee wellness strategies. Team members within the organisation are encouraged to express their creativity in an environment which supports their growth. Mistakes are okay, as long as they celebrate the learnings from failure. Support is provided in areas of social events, leisure activities and health and wellbeing information. Google's dividends speak for themselves. So why should a veterinary practice be any different? After all, people are people. Creating a 'well' practice environment can lay seed to greater commitment and accountability, reduced absenteeism, improved staff morale, high performance, better recruitment and great customer service.

Implementing 'wellness strategies' in your practice can be a simple yet effective exercise. As with any wellness program however, the two most effective elements are management reinforcement and employee participation. Implementation of a wellness program should first be preceded with employee consultation. Establish the reasons for a program with the team and gain their feedback. Ideas on specific wellness options should be tabled and assessed. You may wish to allocate program responsibility to an employee(s) who is motivated in this area.

Elements of a practice wellness program could include:

- Paying for the annual flu shot
- Ensuring your employees take their lunch break
- Sourcing corporate rates for local activities such as gyms, PCYC etc
- Holding monthly social events
- Making yourself available to staff (not just to talk about cases)
- Health and Wellness Seminars on a regular basis – invite your local nutritionist, counsellor or a personal trainer to speak
- Equipping your team with emotional intelligence skills, not just technical – these could include assertiveness, prioritisation, handling difficult communicators or coping with emotional fatigue
- Re-thinking flexible working hours where relevant
- Using things other than money to reward staff
- Providing healthy snacks in the practice, not just chocolate
- Including a wellness discussion in annual performance reviews
- Environmental factors – plants, aromatherapy and appropriate music in the practice
- Creating an outside space for employees to de-stress
- If your staff meetings are after-hours, consider moving them away from the practice i.e. a park, pub etc
- Capitalising on employee's outside interests and hobbies – how can they be incorporated into the practice?

A commitment to providing a workplace which is supportive, creative and healthy doesn't have to cost a lot of money. It does however, require a commitment to the belief that our team members are valuable and have the potential for healthy productivity. The benefits of onsite wellness programs, both tangible and intangible, are evident. As team members feel better, more relaxed, less stressed, more valued and more human to their employers; they enjoy a growth which complements productivity. In these times, where employees seek greater flexibility, recognition and creativity in the workplace, practices cannot afford to ignore this important aspect of business success.

Is there an area within your veterinary practice where you feel you could do with industry consulting expertise? Consider our Team Intelligence coaching program at www.provetccg.com.au You'll find this and more under our Team Development tab. Our Team Intelligence program covers such topics as stress management, managing compassion fatigue, conflict resolution, time management plus a whole lot more.

We can tailor our sessions to suit the needs of your practice. Why not give us a call or send us an email – we'd love to be able to aid in making your practice more streamlined.

And don't forget to 'like' and follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/CramptonConsult) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/CramptonConsult).

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