

Emotional challenges in our work with laboratory animals: tools that support caring for others and yourself

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Abstract

Inevitably, most of us who work with laboratory animals will sometimes form bonds with the animals we are caring for. These relationships will positively enhance the care and wellbeing of the animals' but they also pose important emotional challenges, as was clearly exposed with some contingency managements associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that the industry acknowledge the existence of these bonds and provide institutional support mechanisms to help Animal Technologists to deal with the emotional challenges of their profession. Current COVID-19 associated working logistics pose further challenges such as delegation of responsibilities, separation of working teams and contingency management of stock to name but a few, along with the individual health and social, economic and personal relationship challenges. This article provides some tools and ideas to support a more open, communicative and emotionally-supportive working environment. The importance of 'self-care' is also discussed. There is a growing commitment to nurture a Culture of Care, and supporting our colleagues by raising awareness of our emotional challenges may support this.

Introduction

Working within the animal research sector and dealing with a range of associated professional responsibilities can impact our emotions. It is important that staff recognise this and practice 'self-care' but equally know where and when to ask for additional support when it is needed. Emotional stressors in the work environment can influence our professional and personal integrity, directly affecting how we carry out our responsibilities

and can change our attitude towards colleagues and the animals we are working with. Therefore, seeking a better acknowledgment and understanding of such emotional challenges and how to best manage them is crucial. We hope that by exploring supporting tools to promote openness and emotional resilience, like the use of mindfulness to reduce stress and supporting individual and team reflective practice will provide better coping mechanisms.

Animal-human interactions directly influence the behaviour of the animals; this is in part associated with the dependence relationship between the animal and carer, as it is seen through habituation and positive reinforcement practices.¹ This connection can affect positively the impact the research outcomes as such 'positive' animal and human bond have a 'profound' influence on the animals' behaviour and physiology.² Yet, continuing carrying of such bonds accounts important professional responsibilities. These expectations are to be maintained even in critical challenging personal and professional scenarios, like the current COVID-19 scenario (e.g. different working set ups, increase responsibilities and decision making, higher pressure and expectation, professional uncertainties, etc). Such animal-human bonds remain at the core of the empathetic challenge, as the stronger the bond the more robust the caring activity may be but also the more distressful the execution of experimental procedures or contingency decision (e.g. culling) can be.³ The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many institutions to scale back operations including animal research. Staff have been faced with difficult decisions over what to do with research animals amid lockdowns, exacerbated by uncertainty on contingency provision for funding support and the unpredictability of the length of the lockdown.^{4,5}

Emotional challenges affect us personally and professionally

The relationship between laboratory animals and professional staff who work with them has a overwhelming impact on the animals' wellbeing, as well as on the emotional health of staff including veterinarian, caretakers, researchers and other support staff. Stressors like lack of support and communication, excessive workload, changes on working patterns, delivery of expectations⁴ need to be managed to promote an appropriate balance between expectations, motivation and excessive pressure to avoid leading to work-related stress. Indeed, working with other sentient beings' lives and their wellbeing following the human-induced experimental procedures that can cause harm or distress remains a major emotional challenge. This is also pressured by existing regulatory frameworks and increasing social accountability.^{6,7} All this exposes the vulnerability of individual moral attitudes on care and compassion, along with the professional expectations and accountability.

Emotional stressors, particularly those associated with critically harmful interventions and/or the need to humanely euthanise animals make a significant contribution to the development of so called compassion fatigue.^{8,9} This associated 'reduced awareness/capacity in being empathetic' may evolve in less caring attitudes and further physical and emotional distress and exhaustion.^{10,11} Importantly, such reduced empathy for others will diminish the quality of care towards the animals but also towards colleagues. Such emotional challenges can lead to what is associated with 'compassion fatigue', commonly recognised as a type of stress that results from helping or wanting to help those who are experiencing significant pain, suffering and distress or are themselves under significant emotional duress. Compassion fatigue symptoms can lead to lack of communication, excessive blaming, isolation from others, and excessive complaining attitudes that can easily progress towards bottling up emotions, and mental and physical tiredness and depression.¹²

Compassion fatigue is considered as form of burnout, associated with our social and professional interactions. Possibly it would be also more accurate to refer to empathy fatigue rather than compassion fatigue, as it is empathy that fatigues (tires), in care givers, not compassion.¹³

Our aim is to provide guidance on supporting tools and avenues to help the community to speak out and build up resilience. We wish to raise awareness of specific mental health challenges in the current COVID-19 working environment and how discussion of these can be facilitated within an emotionally supportive workplace environment. For example, it is important that strategies to minimise euthanasia stress (that

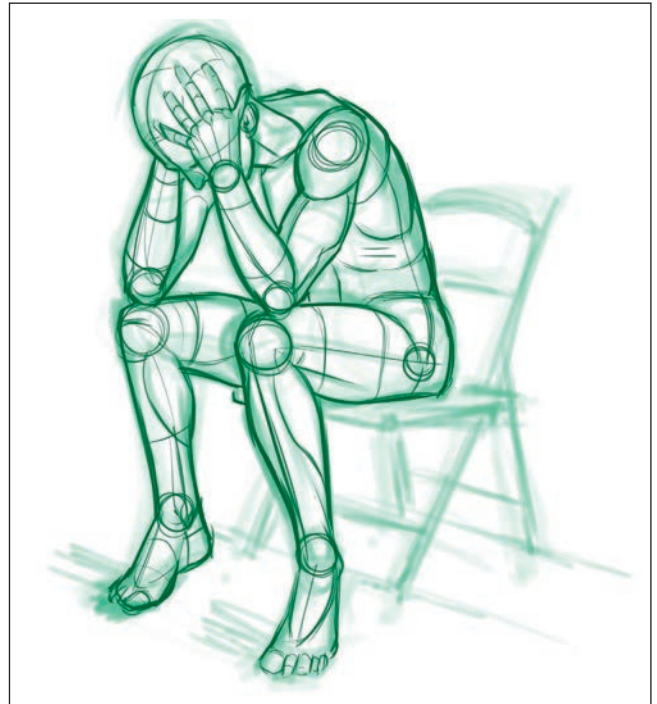


Figure 1. Compassion fatigue.

may contribute to empathy/compassion fatigue) are embedded in workplace cultures, including an open atmosphere to encourage dialogue and expressions of grief, strong social support networks, explanations as to the necessity for the research and openness in the recruitment and training phase of the occupational requirements involved in animal-based research, including euthanasia.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

Using compassion skills for managing our emotional challenges

High quality and conscientious animal care is good for the animals, science, Animal Technologists and public perception of research facilities. There are cross overs between different professions involved with providing a high degree of direct care during their day jobs and the potential for them to become 'over attached' or 'emotionally vulnerable' to specific work cases or situations they may encounter. Emotional burn-out and empathy fatigue are widely reported across a wide range of professions including care-workers, hospital workers, veterinary staff and medics.^{18,19}

Such situations can challenge mental health including our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. This affects how people and animals think, feel, and act. It also influences how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. In such situations it is important to promote a positive mental health approach allowing people to realise their full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively and make meaningful contributions to their communities.

So, how can we make such working environment more 'emotionally supportive'? Well recognised techniques for compassion skills are found in mindfulness meditation programmes which strengthen the need to provide personal space and tools to promote individual and group communication across all different professional layers. Even with short periods of compassion training, participants continue to feel empathy for the suffering of others but gain the capacity to feel positive emotions without feeling distress.²⁰

A practical insight into mindfulness

Mindfulness can be described as being 'fully aware of the present moment', you are free from distraction and can be more focussed on even the simplest of tasks. Thoughts may still be 'flowing in the mind' but you accept these thoughts without judgement or critical reflection.

There are many resources which are freely available outlining the practice of mindfulness in more detail, these include books, online courses, apps and video tutorials. Many community groups or adult education centres (even organisational education CPD centres) offer courses on Mindfulness, many of them on a reduced budget or free of charge. The NHS also has a very useful resource centre on this topic <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>

Mindfulness practice

Starting your day with a mindfulness practice can help charge your batteries with energy that you can draw on throughout the day. Spend time focusing inwards and connecting with yourself to charge yourself up. Choose from one of the suggested mindfulness practices listed below. This practice need not be long, even a few seconds to take some deep breaths can be helpful.

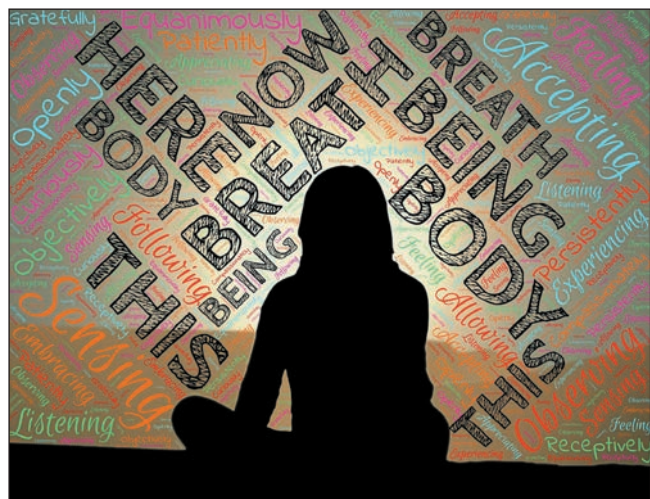


Figure 2: Mindfulness

(i) Three minute mindful breathing space

- One minute for ACKNOWLEDGING what is happening and how you are feeling.
- One minute for GATHERING your awareness around your breath.
- One minute for EXPANDING awareness of your breath into your body – notice where you feel your breath most in your body.

(ii) Mindful check-in

- Whilst either sitting down or standing up, start to focus on your breath.
- Once you feel comfortable focussing on your breath, move your focus into your body.
- Notice any physical sensations you have.
- If any of these sensations are overwhelming, move your focus to the feet – the feet are not generally affected by stress.
- Go on to notice any thoughts, feelings or emotions you are having. There is no need to engage with them, just notice they are there.
- Finally, return to your breath for the last few moments.

Simple tips for boosting your mood

1. Find the good stuff

Each night, write down 3 things you are grateful for or enjoyed. Some people call this a 'gratitude journal', by writing down these thoughts it helps emphasise your feelings and focusses your thoughts. Take time to reflect on these thoughts and how they make you feel.

2. Take a walk

Moving our bodies and getting daylight (especially as the short days draw in during the winter months) helps to lift our mood and clears our mind. The simple pleasures of being more aware of our surroundings, interacting with the elements and exploring new places can have a positive effect on our mood.

3. Ask for help

If you have a problem or something is worrying you, then ask for support. Knowing when to ask for help is not a sign of defeat or failure, it is a sign of your inner strength that demonstrates that you are aware of your mental health and are making decisions not to let it deteriorate. Asking others to help can build a connection, provides opportunity for discussion and gives them a wellbeing boost too! Think 'Good Karma' – when a person does something **good** and that individual's positive actions seem to lead to positive consequences. Doing someone a favour activates the 'feel-good reward centre' in the brain, so not only does the person receiving the favour (or support) feel the benefit, the person performing the action does too!

The NHS website also contains some excellent ‘Stress Busting’ ideas and also links to ‘Stress busting apps’ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/reduce-stress/> The main author of this resource says the keys to good stress management are building emotional strength, being in control of your situation, having a good social network and adopting a positive outlook.

Self-care – a mindful poem to reflect on

Derek Walcott was a Caribbean poet and playwright who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. His poem ‘Love after love’ is about being at ease with yourself, and loving who you are. It is also about owning all of your stories, experiences, strengths and weaknesses – and treating them with respect, compassion and love. It is often cited as a ‘Mindfulness poem’ and it serves as an anchor to reflect on.

How to enhance workplace communication tools

Alongside your employer, you should recognise that you have a joint responsibility to look after your own

wellbeing and that of your colleagues. Managers should be aware of triggers and risk factors for all team members and work to reduce them. Workplaces should foster and support a Culture of Care nurturing mental and physical safety, embracing OPENNESS and COMMUNICATION across all the team players.

Such levels of empathetic openness can only proceed when staff feel emotionally/physically safe and valued.²¹ This caring professional attitude must be well supported by an organised institutional system and as such it translates into proactive management actions and good communication. Providing a safe space where the staff can share and reflect on any personal experiences at work, individually or in group and analysing them openly can inform learning towards an attitude of care. Such experiences can be, for example, monitoring, husbandry or clinical duties with the animals, reading a research article, managing order suppliers, attending a staff meeting, or a debrief with your manager. Team exploration and interactive reflection is crucial to improve care across the institution and build-up strength on staff expertise as individuals with different responsibilities will identify different issues and effects on their behaviour. Group reflection activities should be encouraged in the training schemes, along with protecting physical space and time for this, to support all staff categories, including senior management.

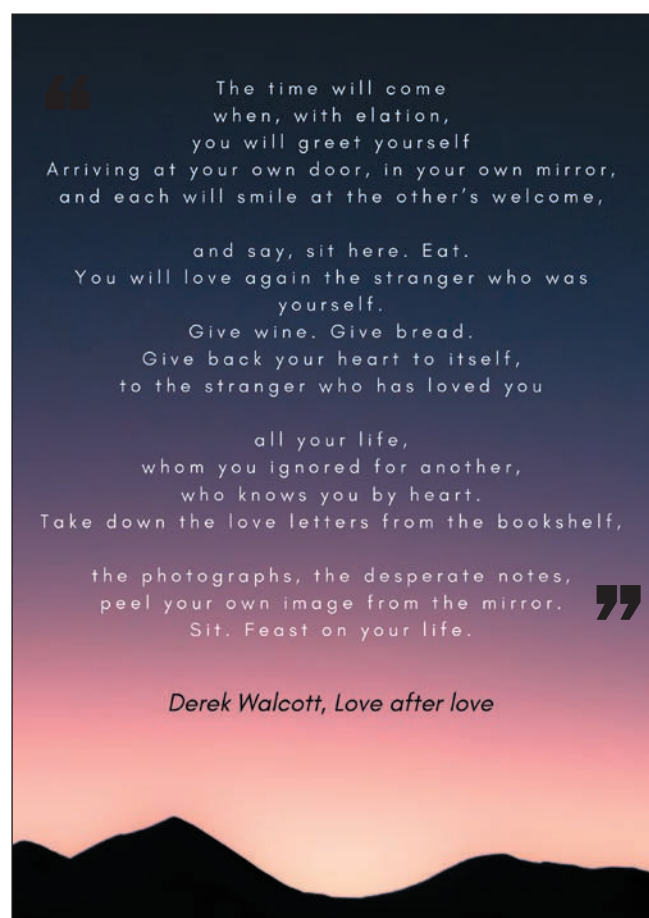


Figure 3: Love after love, a mindful poem.



Figure 4: Positive open communication is key to success.

Communication across all staff levels including senior researchers is also crucial. Engaging communication across different levels of expertise will facilitate a broader perspective analysis e.g. understanding the best husbandry practice is as relevant as publishing a scientific paper.²² Hence any discussion or educational platforms must facilitate communication across the different roles and responsibilities in animal research.

How to promote open discussions at work

Displaying emotions is complex in the working environment and possibly more complex within a laboratory animal set up which often feel formally focussed on compliance and biosafety regulations.

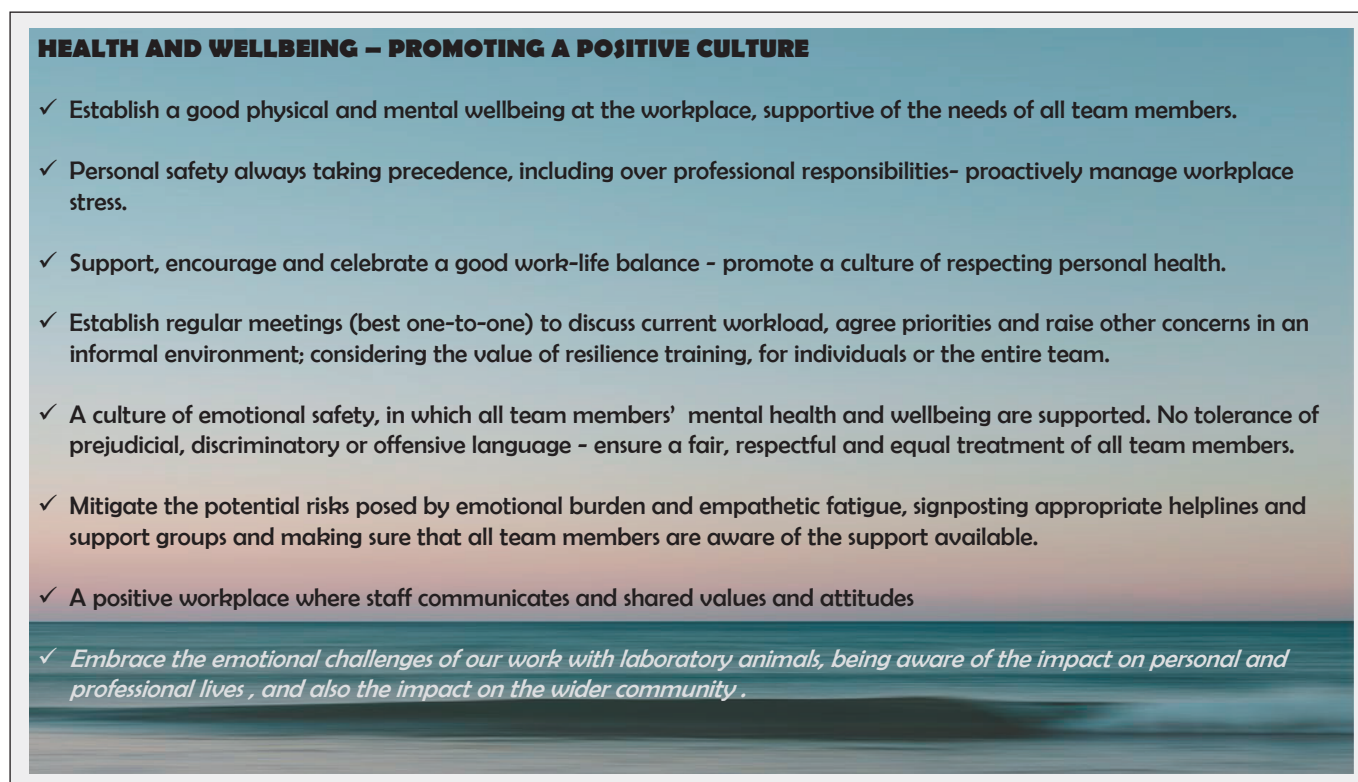


Figure 5: 'Healthy workplace' poster example.

This atmosphere would not seem to most to be an accommodating space for switching off and to openly reflect, sharing personal thoughts and concerns with colleagues. Thus, common areas need to be protected as generally this type of space in the units is prioritised for catering or bench administrative duties, resulting in limited social 'relaxation' space compounded with restricted natural lighting, (which can be beneficial for mood enhancement). Outside of work there are often only limited spaces where staff feel comfortable discussing their work and its emotional impact. On a positive note, emotions can be contagious and as such, can be shared within the group; communication breaks for teams are crucial and must be encouraged and time protected. Promoting openness relies also on providing a tolerant, respectful and safe space!

Laboratory animal professionals do not talk openly in public about their chosen career pathway for fear of disapproval or personal security concerns. This may lead to feelings of 'suppression' and even 'shame' for working in a little understood professional sector being performed behind closed doors with little positive reports or career models openly highlighted. To help counteract this, many UK professional associations, such as The Institute of Animal Technology, have recently campaigned tirelessly for the recognition of animal care staff as 'key workers' in the biomedical field in views of their instrumental work during the COVID-19 emergency.^{23,24}

Individual pro-action remains one of the key pillars of

emotional balance. Techniques such as encouraging expression of emotion in a suitably controlled environment – openness without judgement, positive learning to personal experiences, changing towards optimist patterns, good judgement on specific situations, personal acceptance and avoid comparison with others (everyone is different!), build up pride in any small or large job, better involvement across your working routine, participative engagement with your colleagues and encourage emotional connections.

Some organisations have chosen to display a voluntary 'healthy workplace' poster to help demonstrate their commitments to mental health and to encourage staff to talk openly about their feelings and any challenges they may face in the workplace. Such posters can be used to highlight the core principles and key resources every workplace should have.

Discussion

A healthy workplace is vital to allow Animal Technologists to fulfil their professional obligations and continue to safeguard animal health and welfare and public health. It is vitally important to preserve the caring attitude displayed by animal staff and researchers. The Institute of Animal Technology has released supportive guidelines to support the mental health of Animal Technologists as they adapt to a range of new working measures but also highlighting the need to protect their work/life balance.²⁵



Figure 6: It's okay, not to be okay. (image courtesy of A. Kerton)

In this article we have also highlighted the importance for providing better opportunities for frank discussions on this sensitive topic, promoting better communication platforms. One of the UK's leading mental health charities has the following quotation on its website: *"In the past six years I have had counselling, a brief attempt at CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] and routine meetings with mental health doctors but the thing I have found most helpful is open online forums full of people like me"*.

It is very normal to feel fearful, anxious, low or irritable. If you are having worrisome feelings, give yourself time to reflect on them and accept that they are normal reactions. Humans are programmed to respond to things that are threatening. If you can give yourself time to stay with your feelings for 60 seconds it will help them dissipate. Instead of getting upset by your own emotions, try to be kind to yourself and accepting of your emotional reactions. Small acts of kindness not only to others but to yourself can boost your mood. Why not treat yourself? The 'Buddy Box' subscription box service (<https://www.blurtitout.org/buddybox>) can be used as a 'small treat' to yourself. The contents of each box arrive each month and are designed to counter the pressures we face in modern life. Packed full of thoughtful, mood-lifting treats, the Buddy Box comforts, delights and gives you that warm, 'I've been cared for' feeling inside. In other words – it's a hug in

a box. However there are many other ways to practise 'self-care on a budget' and there are several good ideas here for you to consider <https://www.blurtitout.org/2016/03/30/self-care-budget-10-things-try/>

The implementation of simple but effective approaches like secure discussion groups, virtual 'coffee support groups' and face to face training will represent an important step forward to assist with building emotional resilience. By learning that 'It's OK not to be OK' and communicating personal emotions, it is still possible to be proud ambassadors for the care and welfare of the animals studied as vital research models. We feel it would be beneficial to discuss how those closely working with animals can utilise some of the above-mentioned approaches to support managing emotion. To maintain good mental health and practise resilience techniques, it is likely to be necessary to improve staff's self-confidence at communicating any concerns on animal care and welfare and encourage greater openness, particularly across technical staff and researchers. The implementation of discussion platforms and resilience training opportunities that we have identified will improve not only animal welfare, staff wellbeing, but also the integrity of our research.

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