

COMPASSION SATISFACTION: FLOURISHING IN PRACTICE
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It's our nature as humans to pursue activities that directly or indirectly take us to new levels of fulfillment. In the caring professions, the highest level of fulfillment is compassion satisfaction. We can enhance our capacity, proficiency, and competence, and in this way fulfill our personal as well as professional potential – and flourish – if we strive for the joy found in practice. As stated by Fredrickson & Losada (2005), to flourish means “to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience.”

According to a theoretical model forwarded by Radey & Figley (2007), one's affect, 'physical, intellectual, and social' resources, and standard of self-care predict whether one will experience compassion satisfaction or compassion fatigue. Along with appropriate discernment and judgment, maximizing these three essentials maximizes the positivity ratio, which maximizes the potential to experience compassion satisfaction.

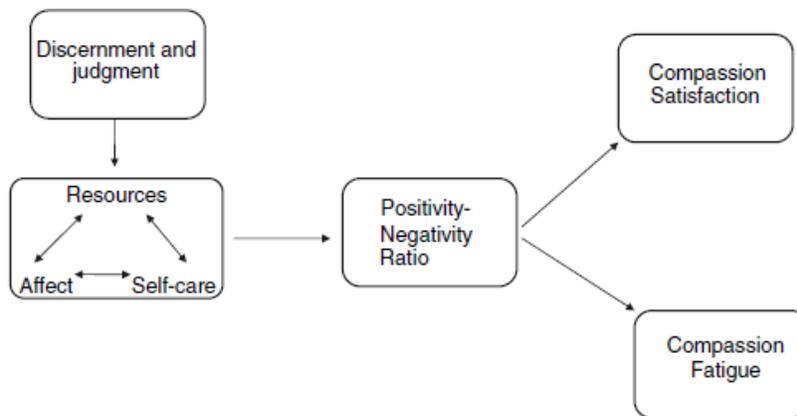


Fig. 1 Creation of compassion satisfaction or compassion fatigue

As found in Radey M, Figley CR. The social psychology of compassion. *Clin Soc Work J* 2007;35:207-214.

If we commit to cultivating the appropriate perspectives, resources, and self-care, our potential to experience compassion satisfaction expands exponentially, and therein, our potential to flourish. There are tangible steps – or calls to action – that each of us can take to maximize the positivity ratio, improving both our personal and professional well-being as well as the service we provide to our patients, clients, and each other. Here's what you can do to set your compass due north to achieve compassion satisfaction and flourish in practice.

Essential #1: Sustain A Positive Attitude

The first call to action is to sustain a positive attitude. There are a surprising number of ways in which you can do this. Daniel Goleman, psychologist, science journalist, and author of the internationally best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, asked George Kohlrieser, a professor of leadership at the International Institute for Management Development, about the importance of maintaining the right kind of attitude. Kohlrieser said, “*The mind's eye is like a flashlight. This flashlight can always search for something positive or something negative. The secret is being able to control that flashlight – to look for the opportunity and the positive. When you do that, you're playing to win. You're able to focus on the right things and maintain that positive self.*” He continued, saying, “*The brain by default is going to look for what is negative until you're assured of survival. Once you feel that you are able to survive, then you can look for the positive. So many people... are looking at what can go wrong in order to survive, and they don't play to win. They play not to lose... The state you're in is determined by what you focus on.*” The message in Kohlrieser's statement is to focus your flashlight *not* on what is *not* working, but on what *is* working. Search for and find the opportunities and “silver linings.” As Viktor E. Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* said,

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Learning to find positive meanings in the circumstances of our lives is a key route to increasing positivity (Park et al. 1996). And as Kohlireser says, it’s playing to win.

Another route to sustaining a positive attitude is to live your life through an “attitude of gratitude.” Express respect, appreciation, and liking; smile at those you pass; and leave kind words behind you. Gratitude is, in fact, good for you. Researchers have found that purposefully generating feelings of gratitude can lower the levels of stress hormones in your body (McCraty and Childre 2004). But how do you generate gratitude? It’s not easy to feel grateful when colleagues are annoyed and clients are demanding your attention. Here are a few tips to try (Institute of HeartMath 2014):

- When you hear yourself starting to blame, whine, vent, or complain, *stop* yourself. Identify one good thing that’s *right* about the situation and comment on that.
- When you find yourself thinking critical thoughts, say “Hmm... That’s *interesting*, but not true.” and then let the thought go. Thoughts are just thoughts – you don’t have to believe them!
- When you find yourself grumbling about a specific client or situation, don’t generalize your feelings. Maintain perspective. Say, “*This* situation is frustrating, but *overall* I work in an amazing place!”

The best news of all is that when you start *identifying* things to appreciate, you are more likely to *notice* things to appreciate. The practice of appreciation creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. So take up the appreciation torch – use gratitude as a strategy to enhance positivity. Give compliments. Acknowledge successes. And most importantly, keep a gratitude journal. At the end of each day, pick out one positive experience that stood out. It can be little, like a smile that warmed your heart, or big, like having saved a patient’s life when the odds were against you. Journalling not only focuses your attention on developing more grateful thinking, it guards against taking life and the many gifts therein for granted.

“Say ‘Yes’ to life.” Eckhart Tolle, author of *The Power of Now*, wrote these famous words, adding, “– and see how life suddenly starts working *for* you rather than against you.” Saying “Yes” means believing in the limitless potential of life. Expect the best; believe that the best is ahead of you – and believe in the best in people. Assume that people are reasonable, honest, and grateful. While not everyone always is, most are. If you convey confidence in people, they’ll live up to your expectations. But since no one is perfect, have the grace to give second chances. You’ll find you receive more too.

Saying “Yes” also means embracing change, because life is all about change. When you embrace change, you *look* forward, *live* forward, and will find yourself living a life that *says* “Yes!”

Sustaining a positive attitude also becomes possible when you release the humorist within you. We all have experienced moments of being funny. We have witnessed the reverberations as the laughter lit the room or eased up a tough situation. Unfortunately, sometimes we are inclined to suppress our natural sense of humour out of fear of looking unprofessional, being judged, or offending. Of course, humour tends to be spontaneous, but sometimes it takes courage. The keys to releasing the humorist within you are to be bold, take risks, persist, and avoid getting hung up on responses. Let that natural part of yourself shine. Dare to be funny! Laughter can be especially important when no one feels like laughing. It releases “feel good” endorphins, and studies suggest it may lower blood pressure, boost the immune system, and increase circulation (Institute of HeartMath 2014). Humour has been regarded as one of the highest forms of coping with life stress. So treat yourself and others to laughter. Good humour is a gift.

It’s important not to censure “dark humour.” Dark humour is *not* a sign that someone is putting on a facade when “nice” to clients and patients up front, and then, at the back of the hospital, showing their true colours by saying “not so nice” things (Cain 2012). It’s *not* a sign that someone doesn’t really care. Both ‘up front’ and ‘at the back’ behaviours are authentic. In truth, *every* social interaction is actually a performance (guided by our norms, i.e. what is acceptable, what is not, how acceptable etc.), and we *all* have ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ behaviours.

“Front stage behaviors emphasize compassion, while backstage behaviors include dark humor, strategizing, and detachment” (Cain 2012). Back stage behaviours make front stage behaviours possible. They allow you the time and space to prepare for your role, practice appropriate ways of being, blow off steam, and take a break from the “emotional labour” of practice (Cain 2012). So don’t censure dark humour; accept and use it. Dark humour may

even inspire new ideas or alternate meanings. It's a natural part of being human and may even help you to be able to forgive and let go.

Searching for the positive, living through an "attitude of gratitude," saying "Yes" to life, and daring to share humour are all routes to sustaining a positive attitude. But there's more! Positivity can be generated through engaging in acts of altruism (e.g. pro bono services), benefiting you, your team, and your practice, as well as the beneficiaries. Altruism rouses the social emotion of "elevation," which is "the warm or glowing feeling in the chest [that] makes people want to become better moral beings" (Keyes and Haidt, 2003). Elevation, roused by "witnessing acts of human moral beauty or virtue," enhances the desire to "affiliate with and help others" (Keyes and Haidt, 2003). It fosters hope in the potential of humanity and finds joy in the outcomes, which broadens and builds positivity.

Essential #2: Build Your Resources

The second call to action is to maximize your intellectual, social, and physical resources. Starting with the intellectual side of you, take advantage of the many continuing education opportunities available to expand your knowledge and skills, such as provincial, national, and international conferences that offer lectures, seminars, workshops, and wet-labs; local veterinary academy meetings; in-class and distance education courses; and industry-delivered educational sessions. In-house, you can be creative and develop a peer education program, taking turns researching and presenting on issues particularly germane to the interests of your staff and practice. Staff meetings are refreshing, fun and appealing when they include a CE focus.

Learning tends to be most meaningful (and thus most memorable) when it happens in context, within the daily flow of practice. This is where pulling a book off a shelf, logging into VIN, and consulting with peers and specialists comes in. Conducting independent on-line research, reviewing educational videos/DVDs, reading journals, and keeping up with the publications produced by your regulatory body and provincial association also play a part in your professional development. Research in nursing has found a statistically significant negative correlation between compassion fatigue and 'knowledge and skill' (Burtson and Stichler 2010), making lifelong learning protective. Even reading for pleasure makes a difference. It develops your vocabulary and keeps your imagination alive, "exercising" your brain outside of veterinary medicine. Consider poetry, crossword puzzles, and word games. Challenge your brain in the more playful and less perfunctory ways.

Moving to the social side of you, get and stay connected – and I don't mean on Facebook! Build your social network. Reach out to colleagues, friends, and family. Set aside "sacred time" for those who are important to you. Intentionally affiliate with those who share your values, believe in you, and nurture your growth, both inside and outside of work. Create social events to honour and celebrate your colleagues. Such events improve the quality of your interactions and enhance the sense of social belonging. Be inclusive. We are inevitably better when we look to each other for support.

Last, but not least, you need to take care of the physical side of you. Quoting Jim Rohn, businessman, author, and motivational speaker, "Take care of your body. It's the only place you have to live." So strive towards a healthy balanced diet, watch your weight, and make sure you maintain adequate activity and rest. In taking care of your physical health, you can better take care of your patients and clients. Your physical health is one of your greatest resources.

Overall, you function at your best when all three resources are optimized. So take the initiative to maximize your intellectual, social, and physical resources. They all contribute to the resilience that sustains positivity.

Essential #3: Take Care Of Yourself

The third call to action is to take care of yourself. This encompasses the whole self, the balance of body, mind, and spirit. Whatever helps you to feel uplifted and rejuvenated counts. It can be as simple as taking your dog for a walk, or as *un*-simple as taking sky-diving lessons. Pursue your passions, but never forget the simple things in the pursuit of the less simple things. Sometimes the simplest things make the biggest difference. The key is to find what enlivens you. Cultivate interests, activities, and hobbies beyond work. Participate in sports. Make time to read and play. Eat well – and what you enjoy. Embrace spirituality. Practice relaxation techniques. Get in touch with nature and the outdoors. Take meandering soul-filling walks. Interact with children and animals. Volunteer and contribute

to your community. There are many creative and personally meaningful ways to feel invigorated and soothe your senses and make you feel alive, relaxed, and well.

Practices can take care of you too, and in this way help you to take care of yourself. They can provide appropriate training and supervision, the necessary tools to practice well, opportunities for continuing education, schedules that honour work-life balance, and adequate salaries and benefits.

Use Good Judgement

The last call to action is to discern the degree to which you give of yourself. Be sensitive to healthy boundaries to avoid under- or over-extending the self, attending to both personal as well as professional boundaries. Self- and other-awareness are the prerequisites to good judgement. Know yourself, what motivates you, and why, and question your motives and actions. Be aware of the needs and interests of others. Checking in with a trusted friend or colleague can help you maintain balance and perspective.

Ultimate Outcomes

With appropriate boundaries, increased affect, resources, and self-care can generate a higher positivity-negativity ratio, creating the optimal potential for compassion satisfaction, and hence, the opportunity to flourish in practice. But it doesn't end here! Research in nursing has demonstrated a statistically significant positive correlation between compassion satisfaction and caring, meaning that compassion satisfaction motivates caring (Burtson and Stichler 2010). This means that when you experience the reward of compassion satisfaction, it will motivate you to care *even more* for your patients, clients, and each other, which potentiates a number of valued outcomes. Greater caring means:

- More conscientious, creative, and consistent patient care, and a higher commitment to patient advocacy, resulting in improved patient quantity and quality of life, and greater client appreciation and loyalty
- Stronger veterinary-client partnerships, which promote greater adherence to treatment plans and improved patient healthcare outcomes, and enhanced veterinary-client relationships, which promote greater commitment to you and your practice, reduced complaints and malpractice claims, and increased referrals
- Warm, considerate, and respectful interactions with colleagues, generating mutual goodwill and support, improved morale, improved productivity, happier workplaces, and an *even greater* capacity to care for patients and clients

The bottom line with all of these outcomes is greater prosperity, for you, your patients, your clients, your colleagues, and your practice.

Compassion for animals and people is a *raison d'être* for doing the work we do. The satisfaction we experience from engaging in compassionate care is the deeply rewarding sense of fulfillment that comes from helping others. Maximizing positivity to experience compassion satisfaction and flourish is “playing to win” and, ultimately, *is* a win – for everyone. Set your compass due north and aim for peak performance, the place where work becomes play. Find the joy – and flourish!

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