

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Challenges and Pitfalls of Working in a Lab

Many of us made the choice to work in laboratories because we love animals, particularly primates, and we wanted to help those who need it the most, laboratory primates, by providing loving care, improving their (lack of) quality of life and psychological well-being, and demonstrating compassion in handling, veterinary, and research practices. It can be very difficult to work in a laboratory when you want to stay and help the monkeys and chimpanzees that you care about but you become disturbed by what goes on there. There are many dilemmas to face; issues beyond your control; questions to ask; emotions to deal with; laboratory culture, politics, and attitudes to balance; and choices to make. All told, these issues, over time, can lead to compassion fatigue (empathy exhaustion) which often forces caring people to leave the laboratory unless they learn to cope with it successfully.

The Laboratory Primate Advocacy Group (LPAG) is committed to sharing the tools for successful coping and fostering support for each other (past and present laboratory workers) in a nurturing, positive, solution/action oriented manner so as to promote healing from our experiences and the strength to continue to aid the plight of laboratory primates from either inside or outside of the lab. LPAG has a listserv that provides a forum for exchange of ideas, information, feelings, and stories. If you have worked or are currently working with primates in a lab and would like to become a member of our support group, look for our listserv email contact information throughout our website and send us an email telling us about yourself and your work. Additionally, the information below provides a means of validating and understanding our feelings, learning about typical laboratory culture and why we don't fit, and applying solutions which heal compassion fatigue and empower us once again.

Caring about animals the way we do allows us the gift of some of the deepest and most rewarding emotional exchanges of our lives. The intensity of our feelings brings joy beyond belief as well as pain beyond manageability. Working with monkeys and chimpanzees in laboratories predisposes us to such feelings which tend to go through a series of phases. Douglas Fakkema, Animal Care and Control Consultant, has worked on behalf of animals for over 25 years mostly within the dog and cat rescue/shelter system. Over the years he has identified a common pattern of phases of caring that people who work on behalf of animals seem to experience. These phases are described in his short essay titled *The Four Phases*.

Fakkema does seminars and lectures on related topics like the challenge of caring for animals in shelters or labs and understanding and combating compassion fatigue. He has presented at primate labs and can be contacted to come to yours for

a fee. Encourage your facility to bring him in to avoid employee burn out and/or get a group of caregivers together and attend one of his seminars. He can be contacted by email, (dkfakkema@aol.com) or phone (843.406.7902).

Upon starting our job in the lab, most of us tried to soak up and adapt to the laboratory environment and attitudes in an effort to fit in. We came in bursting with energy and excitement, certain that we could move mountains. Shortly thereafter though we began to struggle with feelings of discomfort and guilt about the goings on and philosophies that made up laboratory "culture" and we realized that our goals and morals differed from the majority of our co-workers. They didn't seem to get upset over issues that upset us. They had a way of depersonalizing and remaining distant from the animals. Their goal was to do animal research (unlike ours which was to help animals) and they were comfortable with their justification for it. It was a business to them and a horror to us. They seemed to cope very well while we were questioning our own invalidated feelings and falling apart. Dr. Arnold Arluke has devoted his career to studying the effects of biomedical research on those who work in the field and related issues such as human regard for and cruel treatment of animals. Dr. Arluke is at Northeastern University in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology in Boston, MA 02132. He has many other published works worth reading which can be found on his web page under publications on Northeastern's website. His long term study of people in biomedical research (including people like us) is superbly detailed in his article titled: Trapped in a Guilt Cage .

We face a variety of dilemmas and issues in a lab. One of the biggest struggles that most of us face is the moral dilemma of biomedical research on animals. We can't stand to witness or participate in invasive procedures or inhumane practices yet we know that if it wasn't us doing it as compassionately and humanely as possible, someone else could be doing it inhumanely. We give as much as possible all day long but go home exhausted every day knowing that we could never even come close to meeting the needs of the monkeys and chimpanzees in our care who are so grossly deprived in every way. We wish we could make our co-workers care more but realize that we cannot control them. Even if we are fortunate enough to find a co-worker to commiserate with, we can still be left with feelings of depressed resignation. We have the closest day-to-day contact and interaction with the primates in our care yet our input is not often sought or used in making decisions that greatly impact their lives. We constantly are told that there isn't enough money to spend on enrichment or housing improvements but we are well aware of the wealth of the institution and the high dollar research grants awarded. Sometimes we have to watch the improvements we painstakingly brought about be eliminated for no logical reason. We don't want the monkeys and chimpanzees we know and love to be euthanized yet we can't stand the idea of them living in tiny cages undergoing biomedical research for 30+ years.

Some of the questions we ask ourselves include:

- Do I dare express my true feelings about monkeys and chimpanzees in biomedical research if they are not in line with those of the majority of my co-workers' or with the mission statement of the facility?
- Do I show my emotions in front of my co-workers if they don't?
- Do I still believe that I can make a difference?
- Do I risk the scorn of less caring co-workers, especially if they are the majority, by demonstrating compassion for the primates, providing quality enrichment daily even if it is not an enforced policy, or going the extra mile for them in general?
- Do I bring an issue that is NOT okay with me up to the veterinary, research, or supervisory staff even though I know that the general consensus is that it IS okay?
- Do I dare go above my supervisor with an important issue if I feel they did not properly deal with it, knowing full well that there will most likely be repercussions for doing so (like being transferred out of the area where you have special relationships with the primates with whom you regularly work or being assigned an unreasonably heavy work load in an effort to get you to quit)?
- Do I see any true value of the research going on, at the expense of the animals, at the lab where I work(ed)?
- Do I leave the monkeys and chimpanzees I care about to preserve or restore my own sanity or stay at the lab so as not to abandon them?

We also experience a gamut of emotions ranging from love to inescapable feelings of guilt, shame, sorrow, depression, frustration, powerlessness, grief, and anger. The love and joy keep us coming to work while the overwhelming feelings of depressed resignation and sadness eat us alive on the inside and become counter-productive as we develop compassion fatigue.

Because we don't want to leave our primate friends behind we continue to put one foot in front of the other and find the courage to raise issues and fight for improvements and change, in a politically correct manner, being careful not to step on toes within and in spite of laboratory culture and bureaucracy. Some of us can achieve a healthy balance and remain in a lab long term, accomplish good things, and recognize it. Some of us choose to fight harder in the short term and protect our jobs less. Others get angry and have to walk away altogether while others take their fight for primates to the outside. Still others succumb to compassion fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

"Compassion" is a Latin derivative meaning "sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by suffering or misfortune accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the pain or remove its cause." It is the ability to see ourselves in others less fortunate and to understand and care for the plight of others. Compassion fatigue, also referred to as "secondary traumatic stress" or "secondary traumatic stress disorder" refers to the empathetic/sympathetic emotional upset and subsequent exhaustion that can result

from our emotional connection to victims (in this case laboratory primates/animals) that experience traumatic events (in this case life in biomedical research). It can be summed up as "I care so much I'm exhausted." One can be traumatized either directly or indirectly and we can be indirectly traumatized or "traumatized by concern" by our exposure to victims (those directly traumatized) through knowing about, witnessing, or participating in what happens to primates in biomedical laboratories. The stress that results from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering being that we care about can cause us to become emotionally drained and adversely affected by our efforts. A similar condition - "burnout" - can also occur. Burnout occurs gradually and includes symptoms of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion similar to those of compassion fatigue listed below as well as behavioral, work-related, and interpersonal symptoms ranging from aggression, cynicism, depersonalization, substance abuse, and a decline in work performance to a decline in idealism, perceived accomplishments in one's work, and one's ability to communicate and concentrate. Compassion fatigue and burnout are occupational hazards of caring service providers that work with victims. Compassion fatigue can have a more rapid onset and recovery rate than burnout.

Symptoms of compassion fatigue include:

- Anger
- Fatigue
- Depression
- Sleep change
- Eating change
- Flashback/images
- Avoidance
- Isolation
- Sense of helplessness and confusion
- Nightmares/dreams
- Sudden emotional outburst
- Substance abuse

Prevention and Recovery From Compassion Fatigue

Tools for coping with compassion fatigue on an individual level include:

- Talk to others
- Balance between primate/animal helping work and non-helping life
- Stay healthy: diet, exercise
- Humor
- Periodic reassessment
- Spirituality, beliefs (Higher Power), or religion
- Journal feelings, thoughts, personal log

Tools for coping with compassion fatigue on an organizational level include:

- Recognize and accept the existence of stress and the reactions to it
- Encourage discussion/talk
- Compassion fatigue training
- Support groups

The above explanations and information about compassion fatigue are drawn from the works of Douglas Fakkema and Charles R. Figley. For more information Charles Figley has written or edited many books and articles about compassion fatigue. A self-test for compassion fatigue is available online (<http://www.ace-network.com/cfspitlight.htm>), but the questions were written for those in the human helping professions such as counseling and would need to be answered with laboratory primates in mind as "the client."

The goal in preventing and recovering from compassion fatigue is to attain a happy, healthy, and normal life outside of work. Social support is perhaps the most important aspect of trauma recovery and the need for it for laboratory primates as well as laboratory workers should be recognized by the biomedical industry. But we as laboratory workers can create our own social support whereas laboratory primates have little to none and their conspecific social support consists only of fellow trauma victims. So even though we may have stopped talking to family and friends about our work because they just don't understand, it is important to seek out the right kind of healthy listening ear of those in or out of work who will validate your feelings. Make suggestions to your facility management to take supportive measures such as starting a support group or inviting Douglas Fakkemma to do a workshop. Writing in a journal can be a great source of venting, processing your feelings, telling your laboratory stories, and healing. Getting a healthy state of mind back will help you and the monkeys and chimpanzees in labs. Reassess your situation periodically so that you will be able to stay at the lab for as long as you can and not longer than you should. There comes a time for some of us when we can be more helpful to lab primates from the outside.

Don't live and think WORK all the time. Get involved in hobbies. Get active. Find a comfortable spiritual outlet that will feed and heal your soul. Have some fun in and out of work. Enriching the monkeys and chimpanzees is both essential and therapeutic for you and them. Educate yourself about enrichment and the natural behaviors and needs of primates. A great way to get educated and have fun is to attend conferences on primate topics where you can learn, share ideas, and network with others who care. There is a multitude of enrichment information, sources, and ideas in the Enrichment section here on our Mental Health page.

Focus on the good that you do and know that you DO make a difference. One of the most effective ways of bringing about change in your facility is by setting a good example in all that you do in and out of the lab on behalf of primates. Seek out, encourage, and empower like-minded co-workers to raise issues and push for improved conditions in your lab. There are some caring research/vet techs, researchers, and vets as well as caregivers within the laboratory system. The only way

it will become more acceptable for caring laboratory workers to speak out is if more of you do. The only way that certain conditions will improve is if you are constantly questioning, evaluating, and policing your facility and proposing change (either in a creative politically correct way to superiors, or to regulatory agencies). Just because something has been done one way forever in the lab does not necessarily mean that there is no better way or that it is right. But you must educate yourself on what primates need, the minimum requirements that laboratory regulatory agencies set, and where and how to report deficiencies.

The only way those outside of the lab will know about these issues/problems (which are often perfectly acceptable to all of the inspection agencies and committees that are supposed to protect lab primates) is if you disclose them. LPAG can be one such forum. As long as labs still exist, we need caring people in them which is why you and the work you do is very important. We have a unique perspective in that we work closely with lab primates and may be the only ones within the lab system whose primary concern is for the primates themselves. Speaking out on their behalf may be the closest they ever get to having a voice since they have no say of their own in labs. If we do not speak for them, they are left in the hands of institutions that do not have their best interests in mind such as the NIH, large pharmaceutical companies, and researchers driven and biased by their egos and research goals.

We can channel our feelings of depression, anger, and helplessness into renewed energy and commitment in order to truly help monkeys and chimpanzees in laboratories. Taking the right kind of action is a great way to beat compassion fatigue and help our laboratory loved ones. But we can only achieve this by getting and staying mentally, spiritually, and physically healthy, supporting each other, and working together. **WE CAN AND WILL DO IT - TOGETHER!**