



Recommendations: Stress and Burnout

Across all occupations, stress commonly originates from a perceived lack or inadequacy of resources, support, or time to complete one's duties. It also can stem from frustrations around the work itself, frustrating interactions with the public, euthanasia activities, standard operating procedures, conflicts at work, poor communication, poor supervision, and workplace relationships.

Burnout can strike even the most dedicated employees and often follows in the footsteps of stress. Burnout is characterized by exhaustion and lack of enthusiasm, and it can be associated with all sorts of unpleasant consequences for staff, like reduced motivation and performance and increased turnover. Burnout is especially prevalent among those in caring roles (like animal shelter workers) and is an essential component of "compassion fatigue"— a syndrome marked by emotional exhaustion and secondary traumatic stress from overextending one's compassionate resources. Symptoms of compassion fatigue commonly include stress, anxiety, hopelessness, negativity, physical health complaints, and even substance use.

Fortunately, several resources specific to animal shelters are freely available, and we have identified some of these best practices below. The first line of treatment is always prevention. A focus on early intervention at the earliest signs of stress or burnout among staff members will offset major setbacks and keep them healthy, balanced, and committed to the organization. If you want to address and improve employee stress and/or burnout in your organization, try these best practices:

Best Practices

1) Open Two-Way Lines of Communication

Open two-way lines of communication with your employees to make it clear you are serious about stemming stress and burnout in the organization. Be transparent as much as possible. Employees should feel like leadership in the organization and the organization itself is a resource to help them with the demands of work. Help them feel this way by giving your employees a voice and by taking their concerns seriously. Start by making an announcement that the organization is taking steps to address stress and burnout at work and make it clear that you will be soliciting feedback on how to improve. It may be wise to send this announcement via multiple channels (e.g., organization-wide email, during a meeting, directly from a supervisor, open forum). Much of stress and burnout

management entails regular re-assessment and readjustment. Your employees should have the opportunity to provide feedback on what's working, and what's important to them.

Be thoughtful about the form and frequency of communication. Providing updates and asking for feedback too often can place additional demands on your employees, thereby potentially creating more stress and burnout. Consider providing an initial plan of target areas for improvement and ask your employees to identify additional areas. You may not be able to make all adjustments immediately, but be sure to indicate what can be done right away, what will need to wait for the future, and what cannot be done at all. Above all, explain why any of these adjustments cannot be made. Be prompt with your responses. Target a 36-hour turnaround time for employee inquiries. After instituting major changes at work, follow-up with employees to see how the adjustments have worked, and fine-tune as necessary. Set up regular "stress/burnout checkups" for your employees to provide feedback and ask questions. This may mean assigning time to monthly or quarterly meetings to talk about stress, burnout, and the strategies your organization has undertaken to reduce stress and burnout, or polling some or all of your employees, or tasking supervisors with setting aside time (e.g. "open-door policy") for employees to raise concerns about stress and burnout, etc.

Research in occupational health indicates three primary strategies for combatting stress and burnout in the workplace: 1) reduce job demands, 2) increase employee personal resources, and 3) increase on-the-job resources available to meet those demands, with the best or most effective strategy combining all three approaches. Your employees should be told what strategy or combination of strategies your organization plans to put into motion.

2) Reduce Job Demands

Understandably, it may not be feasible to simply decrease the workload for your employees. However, it is possible to reduce the demands associated with their work. Think about the emotional demands associated with caregiving and animal shelter work. Decreasing the frequency and duration of particular tasks that are emotionally draining can stop stress before it starts and halt burnout in its tracks. Use job task rotations across employees (for example, on the same timeline that shifts are scheduled) to spread the burden of emotionally demanding or time-consuming tasks. Rotate employees through brief breaks during high-demand work cycles to give them time to relax, recharge, and refocus. Even a short break can help reduce feelings of pressure at work and keep employees from getting in a rut or pattern of compassion fatigue. Autonomy can go a long way toward reducing stress, so when possible, allow employees some latitude in deciding how often they

perform emotionally demanding tasks (like euthanasia). Research from animal shelter workers identifies such rotations and autonomy as top recommendations from the workers themselves to reduce the strain associated with emotionally demanding work. Where demands cannot be reduced, increasing personal and job-related resources should be a top priority.

3) Increase Personal Resources

Personal resources can be fostered through various programs and activities, especially those associated with overall employee wellness. Coaching and informal counseling by supervisors can work wonders to bolster employee abilities to grapple with stress. Encourage managers to talk with their employees or institute an open-door policy and give pep talks around high-demand work. Consider offering training to your managers around these important skills and strategies. Likewise, interpersonal support among staff can help employees to better cope with stress and the antecedents to burnout. Set up employee support groups, meetings, or roundtables to encourage employees to talk and share techniques they use to manage stress and burnout. Whole-person wellness activities are often also employed to reduce stress and burnout at work. For example, meditation and mindfulness programs, yoga, and group exercise activities are great ways to recharge your employees and better position them to tackle the demands of work.

4) Increase Job-Related Resources

Job-related resources can, of course, be increased by employing additional staff, but we will highlight low- or no-cost options here. Judicious use of qualified volunteers can provide additional support resources for over-burdened employees. Try rotating employees through training programs to provide them with skills that they can use to support other employees. For example, if animal care is bottlenecked at adoption, intake staff trained on adoption could be reassigned to support adoption staff. Additional training and timely, positive feedback from supervisors can instill employees with the additional confidence and personal reserve to tackle high-stress work. Providing clear goals and rewards associated with those goals (such as a target average length of time to adoption for a month) can provide employees with a sense of accomplishment and shift their focus from the demanding parts of work.

5) Ongoing Awareness and Assessment

Ongoing awareness and assessment are critical to addressing burnout and stress issues. Think about setting up a suggestion box specifically for stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue at work. Deter employees from using this as an opportunity to complain about co-workers. Encourage them to

identify the times, places, policies, and/or procedures that stress them out along with suggestions for improvement. Check out the [ASPCA](#) for web-based articles regarding [coping strategies for managers](#), and [stress and animal protection work](#). For additional reading material, Laura van Bernoot Lipsky's [Trauma Stewardship](#) is a popular, quality choice. The [HSUS](#) offers multiple articles on [compassion fatigue](#) in their [Animal Sheltering Magazine](#)—these are great, brief readings to provide to staff and managers. PetSmart Charities also offers [a webinar series on Compassion Fatigue](#) specifically for animal care workers. Check out the HeartMath Institute's website for a fun and interactive way for employees to de-stress: [Biofeedback for Stress, Burnout, & Compassion Fatigue](#).

6) Prevention

Implement policies and procedures to prevent burnout before it even starts. The ASPCA provides a sample of policies intended to prevent burnout: [Personnel Policies to Prevent Burnout - ASPCA](#). Often, the best way to reduce stress is to prevent it before it happens. Review the policies (ideally along with your committee or task force) at your organization for stress points (i.e., areas where demands may exceed knowledge and abilities) and identify ways to assign more resources or limit occurrences of stress points. For example, during peak intake cycles, assign additional staff to both intake and adoption to move animals through the shelter more quickly, thereby lessening the overall load on your employees. Train managers to help employees cope with stress. Local colleges may offer brief, low-cost courses in stress management (and these are likely to be superior to paid courses from web-based businesses). Encourage them to enact an “open-door” policy in which employees can come talk about stress—managers can and should then report these stress points and proposed improvements upward.

The ASPCA provides information on coping strategies for managers: [Coping Strategies for Managers - ASPCA](#). The Figley Institute offers a certification in Compassion Fatigue. Certified managers can provide support, knowledge, and training sessions for staff to alleviate compassion fatigue or stop it before it starts: [Compassion Fatigue Certification Training - The Figley Institute](#). Staff members, too, can be certified as compassion fatigue educators. [Green Cross Academy](#) provides a certification in traumatology that would be great for employees.

Many organizations are making Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) available to address risks for occupational health and well-being. Typically, these programs provide short-term counseling for employees as part of an employee benefits program and can potentially be a low-cost way to address burnout, stress, and compassion fatigue among employees.