

Final Thoughts



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Julie is a compassion fatigue specialist who brings a unique perspective and approach to support the sustained energy and passion of animal workers. Her company, Rekindle LLC, offers on-site compassion fatigue training to veterinary hospitals, animal shelters, and other animal organizations.

Julie has more than 20 years of experience within the veterinary field and with leading organizations. She has developed and executed training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for major companies in the animal health industry. She obtained her certification as a compassion fatigue specialist through the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology and has also completed training from The Figley Institute and Traumatology Institute. Julie's clients also gain from her experience as a certified health and wellness coach and corporate wellness specialist.

Be With What Is

Nurses eat their young.

I'd never heard that phrase before my training to become a compassion fatigue specialist. It's what happens when a new nurse hits a unit occupied by veteran nurses. At the first sign of the newcomer's vulnerability, the seasoned nurse says, "Hey, honey, you better get used to this real quick and just suck it up!"

And this is how we become hardened. This is exactly the moment we start building that protective shield around us. Replace "nurse" with "veterinary technician" or "veterinarian" or "receptionist." We are all that "nurse."

When did you lose your naiveté?

I once facilitated a workshop in which a veterinarian said to me, "In vet school, we learned to work at an insane pace, skipping meals and sleep, and were told to just suck it up. I never even thought about how crazy it was until I look back on it now. Wow." Perhaps the pace and expectations are inhumane? Perhaps a profession built on empathy and compassion needs to first extend it to oneself?

You've done nothing wrong. It was your training that was wrong. You were never taught how to ensure your own well-being before you offer your help to another.

Yet in my workshops, I see the strain on the faces in the room. The veterinary technicians are often just waiting for me to tell them that the way they feel is *normal*.

We build up walls around ourselves and around our hearts for mere protection. It's a brilliant idea, except it doesn't work.

We can't selectively choose which emotions we are going to let in: Sadness? Nope. Despair? Definitely not. Anger? No. Joy? Sure! It doesn't work that way.

As Brené Brown says, *when we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.*¹

So then how do we protect our vulnerable hearts, yet still be empathetic and compassionate? There's a big question with a big answer.

It starts with *being with what is*, or *mindfulness*. This is a practice. Mindfulness asks us to be in the moment, in the actual experience without judging it or having expectations about it. We are hardly ever truly in the moment. Right now, as you are reading this, you are likely also thinking about something else, something you are doing later or something that occurred earlier. We live our lives through the cacophony of our minds.

My friends, an untrained mind is like a drunken monkey stung by a bee.

An untrained mind constantly produces suffering. I've often said I am a student of suffering. It's a lifetime of suffering that led me to do the work that I do around compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is suffering, and I know the way out.



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So back to the mind. Its job is to keep you safe, so it's constantly scanning your life to find ways to do that. This is a noble job. However, one of its most basic—and outdated—responses is to create fear and separation. We no longer live in a world where a predator is around every corner. We no longer have to be on guard every moment of every day.

We've earned the right to enjoy and be in the moment that is happening right now. In order to get there, we need to train ourselves to quiet the hamster wheel in the mind—that mind that is constantly pointing out where we've fallen short or aren't enough.

How do you do that, you might be asking?

1. Connect to your breath. Your breath is your connection to the present moment. Close your eyes and just notice your inhalation and exhalation. Don't change it, just notice it. Notice the rise and fall of your chest and/or belly as it rides the wave. I do this every morning for 15 minutes and it sets the entire tone for my day. It's my time with God.

2. Be with what is. Most of the time, we are busy wishing things were other than they are. Wishing we were on a vacation, thinner, sleeping, richer, had more friends, a better relationship, a different meal, and were on a different

cashier line. But wishing things were other than they are takes us out of the moment and toward suffering.

3. Savor. We all can relate to savoring a great meal or a decadent dessert. Do we also savor the good moments of life? Do we savor the joyful moments in the practice? When the long-term case goes home or when the really sick kitty beats the odds and recovers? As human beings, we have a negativity bias that causes us to focus on the negative aspects of things.² But by allowing the good moments to really sink in, we become uplifted and filled. And filled is the opposite of empty, which is what many in helping professions feel most of the time. So the next time you experience something nice, sweet, or beautiful, let it linger in your heart for a bit longer. Feel how good it feels, and let it permeate you.

I can tell you that by incorporating those practices into your daily life, you will start to rejuvenate and become reinvigorated. I've witnessed it personally. I can also tell you that you will begin to work from a place of *abundance* rather than *depletion*.

Perhaps for the very first time. ■

References

1. Brown B. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing; 2010.
2. Marano HE. Our brain's negative bias. *Psychol Today* 2003. www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200306/our-brains-negative-bias. Accessed December 10, 2015.