

Practicing Compassionate Badassery®:

Shifting from Self-Care to We-Care

By Jessica Dolce, MS CCFE

For the past seven years I've listened to thousands of people who work in animal care and welfare struggle to understand how their work has impacted them. They don't always know the exact terminology for what they're experiencing – is it compassion fatigue, burnout, moral distress, vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, empathy strain, PTSD, ethical stress, role overload, traumatic loss, cumulative grief? – but they do know that they are not okay. They do know they're not the same person they were when they first came to this field.

Call it what you want, we're all changed by this work.

Sometimes we are changed for the better – some of us are able to access something called vicarious resilience. Which comes from years of bearing witness to countless acts of compassion and the profound healing of the animals and people we work with.

But in order to access and sustain our resilience, to thrive and not just survive, we must work together to create the conditions for all of us to be well.

I often use the phrase “practice compassionate badassery” with my students – this refers to the courage it takes to show up with a kind, compassionate heart to care for those who are suffering. To do this difficult, but meaningful work – and to do it ethically, effectively and sustainably - they must be healthy and well.

Practicing Compassionate Badassery is short hand for choosing to care for yourself AND care for others. Self-care and service inherently belong together.

We practice Compassionate Badassery by making intentional, often difficult, choices that build our internal and external resources – our capacity – to do our jobs, without causing harm to ourselves or those we serve.

Unfortunately, when workers invest in their own welfare it often puts them at odds with “helping” culture and organizational policies and culture - in which a lack of boundaries, over-giving, grinding productivity, emotional stoicism, and exhaustion are celebrated as the ideal.

And so in our current culture, it takes as much (if not more) courage to care for yourself, as it does to care for others.

Of course, many organizations want their staff to be well and encourage their workers to take care of themselves. They might even hire me to teach their staff how to do self-care. That's a good thing. Self-care matters.

But research tells a more complex picture about worker wellbeing: Staff self-care is a necessary component of increasing resilience, but it is not sufficient on its own.

Organizations must invest resources in creating healthy, safe working conditions through trauma-informed policies, programs, practices, and procedures.

It's got to be self-care and we-care. That's how we stay well and make a big impact for animals.

This singular focus on self-care as the solution is why most organizational wellness efforts fail.

Self-care cannot fix a broken system or burnout culture or racial trauma.

Self-care can't fix policies and programs that undermine, undo, or prevent human wellbeing.

In other words, it doesn't matter how hard you scrub, you'll never really get clean, if the water you're swimming in every day is dirty.

Our people deserve better. The work being done by in shelters cannot be replaced by machines or outsourced to other countries, and yet, many workers are underpaid, overworked, undertrained, and exposed to numerous physical and mental occupational hazards.

Our frontline workers struggle to pay their bills, take time off, or access medical care.

Their self-care efforts to eat well, rest, and exercise fall flat when there is no coverage for them to take a break, so they can eat that healthy lunch, take a vacation or see their therapist.

Their self-care efforts don't stand a chance if their job description is really 4 jobs rolled into 1.

No amount of free pizza can fix low wages, long hours, and a lack of safety on the job. We can do better.

Ibram X. Kendi said, *"Individual behaviors can shape the success of individuals. But policies determine the success of groups."*

As leaders you have an enormous impact of the quality of life of your employees. Your workers' wellbeing and resilience both on and off the job will be shaped by the policies and culture you help to create.

Compassionate, innovative, humane organizations must include the welfare and wellbeing of WORKERS in their mission.

And if we want to practice compassionate badassery at the organizational level then, we need to be bold. We must be willing to reinvent our workplaces by centering worker wellbeing.

We won't be able to look to other helping professions for answers on how to do this. They too are struggling with high turnover, dissatisfaction, ethical distress, discrimination, burnout, and compassion fatigue in their workforces.

Compassionate badassery requires us to use our imaginations. What would happen for all of us, including the animals, if our workers weren't just getting by, but were thriving?

If they were well trained, deeply appreciated for their diverse strengths, generously compensated, had full access to excellent healthcare, affordable, safe housing, regular paid time off with coverage, flexible hours for child and elder care, and came to work each day filled with energy and joy in their hearts?

What would our communities be like then?

Does that seem like a fantasy? It is right now. Activist Adrienne Maree Brown reminds us that *“All social justice work is science fiction. We are imagining a world free of injustice, a world that doesn't yet exist.”*

Our present circumstances are a reflection of the imagination of those who came before us. We currently live in a reality shaped by the imagination of a capitalist, white supremacist culture that profits by exploiting animals, humans, and the environment.

Our field exists to fight for a better reality for living beings – one in which companion, farm, and wildlife animals are treated with dignity and the human-animal bond is honored.

Now it's time we imagined and fought for something bold and different for ourselves and our workers. Working conditions we may never see, but that we want for those who come after us.

Are you thinking that just isn't possible for nonprofits or municipal shelters? Maybe.

But remember that right now, the animal welfare field is living in a reality shaped by the imagination of people who, decades and decades ago, decided that animal sheltering could be done differently.

They helped imagine this moment into being - where the lives of millions more healthy animals are saved, community cats are treated with care, victims of dog fighting are assessed as individuals, and the human animal bond is honored.

I bet they were told it was a crazy idea. That it would cost too much and take too many resources to make these changes.

But they, along with many others, kept their imaginations pinned on the vision of what could be, no matter how unrealistic it seemed in the present moment.

The next frontier in animal welfare social justice work is within our own walls. Our wellbeing and resiliency as a field and as human beings is dependent upon us imagining workplace systems that are far, far better than what we currently have.

What can we dream of? What kind of lives do we truly want for ourselves and our people? Think bigger. Don't stop until you say what you think is impossible. Then claim it as your north star and orient yourself towards that distant horizon.

In the meantime, while we envision a future in which wellness isn't a privilege and mental protection for workers is on par with physical protections, we can start making changes right now to create better working conditions that will strengthen our organizations ability to succeed.

Here are 5 strategies:

#1 Fund operating expenses. If you are in a position – a board, a granting organization, a city council – that determines what is and is not funded, you must start funding operational expenses. With all money going to direct animal care, there is nothing left to pay the very people doing that work. Paying people a living wage or equitable salary should not be a reason to have your Charity Navigator score dinged. Higher wages, better equipment, better benefits, and more coverage will reduce turnover and increase the quality of services being offered. Any equitable investment in the humans who make the programs function will only benefit the animals.

#2 Increase healthcare benefits. Every single worker should be able to afford to go to the doctor, the dentist, or see a therapist for as many sessions as necessary to help them cope with the trauma they are repeatedly exposed to on the job. Far too many people in our field still have inadequate or no healthcare coverage at all.

#3 Respond to compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard, rather than an individual weakness. From hiring and orientation to ongoing opportunities for education and supportive supervision, it's time we treated trauma-exposure the same way we would address any other OSHA-regulated job risk.

#4 Train staff in conflict resolution skills. Behavioral euthanasia, regardless of volume, is a top stressor in shelters. These emotionally charged decisions cause fall out in teams or between staff and volunteers. The average shelter worker does not have the skills to navigate these conflicts successfully. Hire educators to teach your staff how to have difficult conversations and engage in healthy conflict. At a minimum, use Standard Operating Procedures around euthanasia decisions. Make the process transparent.

#5 Hire a veterinary social worker. As long as your workers are caring for traumatized, sick, marginalized, and stressed populations, trauma-exposure will remain an occupational hazard. Fortunately, there are highly trained social workers who specialize in supporting pet owners and animal care professionals. Shelters would benefit from hiring a part or full time veterinary social worker to assist pet owners who are distressed and to support your staff's emotional wellbeing through practices such as regular debriefing.

Those are just some ways we can start increasing staff wellbeing and resiliency right now. But it will only get us so far.

In Maine we say, "You can't get there from here." And that may be true.

We may not be able to get from where we currently are to true worker liberation in this country any time soon. But we must begin to imagine that future. Because if we don't imagine it, we'll never even get close.

And we owe it to ourselves, our staff, and future animal welfare professionals to do the hard work of transforming the way that we work.

If it were easy it wouldn't be called practicing compassionate badassery.

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