

## What a trooper! What a dreadful tale

Be glad for the dog, but have empathy for the emotionally scarred caregivers

**Corry Anderson-fennell**

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Mark Vosper has seen some horrible things.

Manager of the BC SPCA's Maple Ridge shelter, he's dealt with hundreds of animals in varying degrees of neglect, animals that have been abused and animals with incurable illnesses nearing the end of their lives.

Nothing, however, prepared Vosper and his staff for the filthy, sick and emaciated golden retriever dropped off at the shelter last year. The mere sight of Trooper, as the dog became known, in the public waiting area had staff and visitors alike in tears.

"It was the worst case of neglect we'd ever seen," says Vosper. "You could almost feel this sense of hopelessness -not only for Trooper's outcome, but for a society that allows this to happen."

Trooper went on to make a full recovery and was adopted into a new home, while his former owner was convicted of animal cruelty, fined and banned from owning animals for 10 years.

But what looked on the surface like a completely happy ending probably took a hidden toll on many staff and volunteers who cared for Trooper, according to expert trauma counsellor Dr. Pat Comley.

"Animal caregivers typically experience at least five crises a week -sometimes all of them in one day," says Comley.

Comley defines compassion fatigue as the emotional exhaustion caused by the chronic demands of helping animals, their owners and the community -emotionally intense work that can be overwhelming and lead to burnout.

"Exercising empathy as well as dealing with trauma, over time, can be mastered but one needs to invest in self-knowledge and self-care to successfully manage it."

Comley, who teaches psychology part-time at Ryerson University in Toronto and travels the country delivering workshops on managing compassion fatigue and trauma, recently gave a presentation to BC SPCA leaders.

Compassion fatigue is often seen in doctors, nurses, soldiers and others whose job is to assist victims of trauma.

Animal-care professionals, including veterinarians and wildlife rehabilitators, also experience compassion fatigue and in fact the Washington, DC-based Humane Society University estimates that compassion fatigue is most prevalent in the animal care field.

"People in this field take animals home, they minister to them, they foster them and they adopt the ones who don't have everything going for them," says Comley. "Maintaining a work/life balance is sometimes lost."

The key to preventing compassion fatigue is resiliency and self-care, she says, and uses an airplane analogy to illustrate: passengers are required to put on their oxygen masks first before they can help others.

"It's that point when we realize that we cannot look after one more thing unless we look after ourselves."

Comley offers tips to manage compassion fatigue:

Understand stress -how to recognize it and transform it.



CREDIT: Les Bazso -PNG

And this is Trooper after the care and attention he received and his adoption since by Athena and Brad Hayward. Trooper is very happy with his new Pitt Meadows family.

Build self-care strategies into your day.

Foster emotional strategies that prevent emotional exhaustion.

Balance hope with reality. Accept your limitations and acknowledge your successes.

Care, but resist becoming overinvested, at the cost of your own well-being.

Gain emotional energy by being positive and self-compassionate.

Incorporate humour and mindfulness into your day.

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