

Strategies for Developing Compassionate Detachment Skills

Compassionate Detachment means supporting someone without taking responsibility for their problems and decisions. Compassionate detachment allows you to empathize and help your clients, while maintaining boundaries and self-preservation so that you can sustain your work long-term. Compassion fatigue can occur when we are not able to detach and restore ourselves between highly empathic connections.

Strategies to Practice Compassionate Detachment

Be Strengths-Based

- Reframe and focus on the strengths of the client or situation. At first, it may feel disingenuous to practice this thinking, but stretch yourself as far as you can go.
- With practice, you will find yourself automatically noticing strengths.
- Being strengths-based helps us cope with complicated negative situations.

Practice Flexible Thinking

- Increase your comfort level with ambiguity.
- Life is complicated. Everyone is imperfect. There will always be better choices and options. There will always be people who do things differently than you would.
- The world is a messy place, and everything is “both/and” not just “either/or”.

Debrief

- Putting words to our experience moves memories out of the implicit part of our brains and makes them explicit which is when we can then make sense of it.
- Practice a daily debrief. Find a debriefing buddy, someone you can talk to about your day and what you’ll try to do to feel good about it. If you don’t have this person every day, try journaling. The goal is to process your thoughts as soon as possible.

Practice Self-Care

- Learn self-awareness habits – notice what triggers good feelings and bad feelings. Do something everyday that allows you to “detox” from your day and be present with yourself.
- Make choices for yourself that support sustainable caregiving. Create habits that promote true self-care such as healthy eating, exercise, debriefing, boundaries (saying no, not being available 24/7 for colleagues), and scheduling fun time.

Be Open to Outcomes but Not Attached to Them

- We cannot always control outcomes, but we can control ourselves.
- Instead of asking, “Did I solve it/fix it/cure it?” ask yourself, “Did I navigate that situation in a way that I can be proud of?” Each person’s measurement will be different, but some may ask, “Was I compassionate? Calm? Clear?”
- To be sustainable, our sense of success can’t be attached to outcomes out of our control.
- Fill in YOUR personal measure: “Was I as _____ as I could have been?”

Self-Care Toolbox

- Regularly check-in with yourself about your basic needs (Have I had enough to eat today? Am I hydrated? Did I get enough sleep? Have I exercised today?)
- Utilize your lunch breaks fully – step away from your computer for the full 30 minutes, eat, go for a walk, stretch, lay down. Take your break every single shift.
- Honor your work-life balance and develop good boundaries. Do not check email, Slack, or work systems when not at work.
- Make a list of your stressors and write some small “baby steps” (starting a big project, delegating, talking to someone about it).
- Utilize your PTO days or ask teammates to swap if needed. Take time away to re-energize, spend time with friends and family, and take care of yourself.
- Identify any maladaptive coping habits and create a plan to cut down or replace them with other strategies.
- Keep a journal or a pad of paper next to your bed. Leave your to dos and worries there so that you can tackle them with fresh eyes the next day.
- Debrief difficult calls or interactions with coworkers, your supervisor, or a loved one.
- Seek support from an expert (EAP line, therapists, counselors, etc.).
- Practice mindfulness each day – Try meditating or spend time doing regular activities mindfully, such as walking the dog or eating dinner.
- Create your own “self care plan” to employ when you need it. This should include all the things that you learn work for you and it will be ready for you when you need it and don't have the energy in the moment.
- Learn about yourself – Practice self-awareness and notice burnout triggers AND things that help. Incorporate that awareness into your daily habits.
- Notice when you are beginning to feel compassion fatigue, burnout, or overwhelm and employ your self-care skills at the first sign and ask for help if you need it.
- Reflect on your “why” and your connection to the work that you do, notice the difference you are making for the clients you help.
- Take a moment to thank a friend, family member or coworker for something they've done.



Meet Kristi Lehman, MSW, LISW, CCFP

Kristi Lehman, MSW, LISW, CCFP is the Vice President at DVMcenter and MN Pets. She earned her Master of Social Work degree from the University of Minnesota, where she had a concentration in clinical mental health and received specialized veterinary social work training at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center. Kristi's passion is helping veterinary teams maintain a focus on compassion resilience and sustainability while they provide high-quality, client-centered care.

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