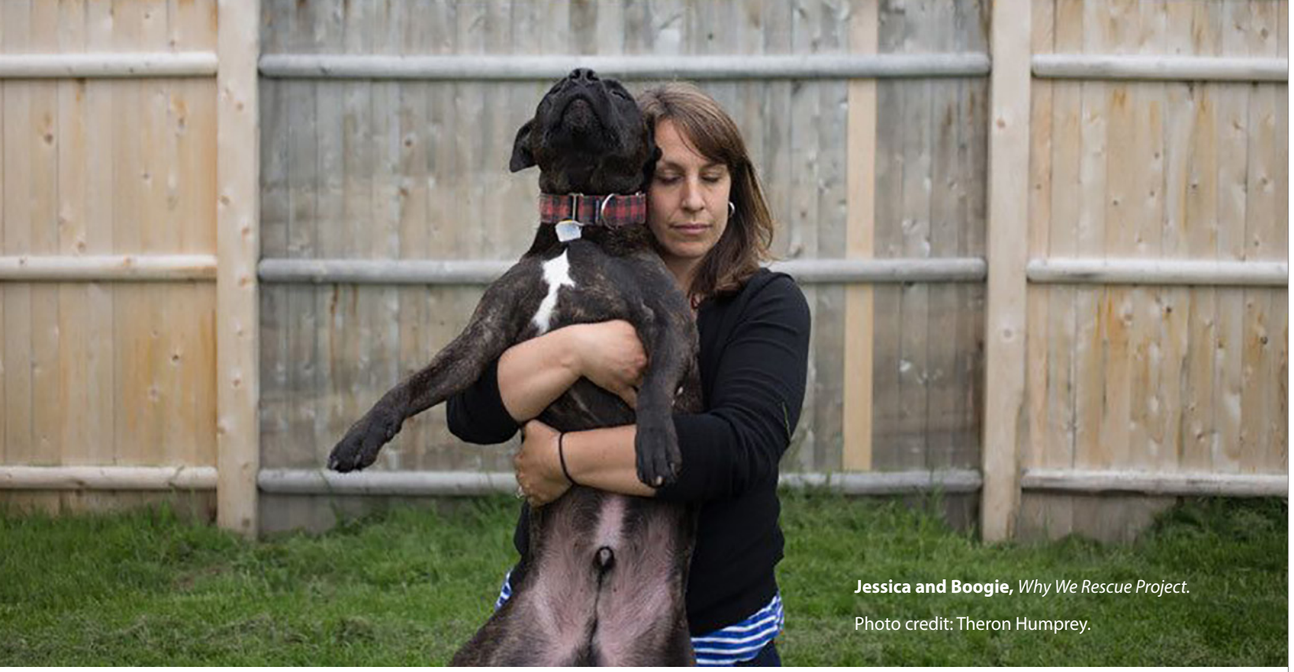

Jessica and Boogie, *Why We Rescue Project.*
Photo credit: Theron Humprey.

How to Practice Compassionate Badassery

The Work of Jessica Dolce

BY MARY HOLMES | ALL PHOTOS © JESSICA DOLCE UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

Being an animal advocate can be fraught with much stress and emotional issues. For those who are "in the trenches," rescuing animals or working in shelter or sanctuary situations, this problem increases exponentially. Jessica Dolce's role as a certified compassion fatigue educator is to teach "you and your team how to practice compassionate badassery, so that you can do the meaningful work you love and feel good while you do it!"

First of all, what is compassion fatigue? According to Dolce there are a lot of definitions, but the most basic is that "compassion fatigue is a very profound physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual depletion, that causes a decline in our desire, our energy, a decline in our ability to feel and behave in a caring way for others. In other words, this intense depletion is a result of that ongoing stress that is associated with showing up to be caring and competent day after day in a very intense caregiving role for animals or people that are typically suffering or traumatized." This doesn't occur overnight, but over a period of time. Sufferers lose their empathy and all the other associated qualities that originally brought them to do this type of work. First we lose empathy for other people, and eventually we lose empathy for animals as well.

Just to confuse the issue, there's a debate going on currently. Is it compassion fatigue, or empathic strain or distress? This debate has come into play because the most recent neuroscientific research has demonstrated that empathy and compassion "light up" different parts of the brain. Dolce feels that eventually we will be referring to it more accurately as empathic strain or distress. She explains the reasoning behind this, "it's that empathic distress that you're essentially feeling what the animals feel and having that experience over and over again that is so painful and depleting that it ultimately changes the way that we function in the work and in our lives." In effect, what we ultimately experience is compassion fatigue, empathic strain, secondary traumatic stress and moral distress, decision fatigue and burnout all rolled into one. The response can be adaptive at first, but as time marches on it becomes maladaptive.

Jessica and Boogie *at work.*

Historically, certification programs for compassion fatigue educators have been around for some twenty years. The original research in the field came from Charles Figley, PhD, formerly associated with Florida State University, where he founded the Traumatology Institute. In 2007 he moved to Tulane University, and brought the Institute with him. **Learn more about Charles Figley here**.

Dolce started doing this work about ten years ago. Being a comparatively new discipline, the field is still unregulated. Training for compassion fatigue educators can be as simple as a one-hour online course, but many programs are much more extensive. In other words, virtually anyone can get certified as a compassion fatigue educator; their credentials can be all over the place. She stated, "It's a pretty unregulated, Wild West kind of profession at the moment."

Tania Singer is behind most of the work on the neuroscience of compassion It involves understanding the difference between empathy and compassion, and is also rooted in a lot of Buddhist philosophy and psychology. In Dolce's words, "some of the experiments and research showed that essentially different parts of our brain light up when we are accessing empathy vs. compassion; when we are experiencing empathy the boundary between us and the other person or animal or being dissolves to a certain extent, it's a connection. We need empathy. Empathy is a really good thing. The problem becomes when that other being is suffering and we're experiencing empathy, it can light up the pain centers in our brains. I think we all can relate to this, it's like we feel in our bodies this painful emotion or sensation often pushing us into a fight, flight or freeze. It's a threat response to be around someone else who's suffering a lot. That is when we start getting kind of tipped into an empathic distress where instead of focusing on the other being who is suffering, we start to withdraw to attend to our own pain."

She further states, "Empathy is a good thing, there is a choice point that we have. This is kind of a theory here, with the difference between empathy and compassion where we can shift away from empathic distress towards something that is sometimes called empathic concern. It's a form of empathic discernment where you are essentially trying to choose the response that is both helpful to the other being and not causing harm to you at the same time. The research shows that when we are experiencing compassion, it is engaging a different part of our brain that is not the pain center. But the point is that, it's not triggering the pain response and it allows us to stay connected. So, empathy is essentially, I suffer with you and compassion is I recognize that you're suffering and I feel moved to take action to help in some way. But it doesn't mean that you stay in the feeling of it. So, there's a compassionate detachment that occurs to some degree and that's less depleting, than staying in the empathy alone."

Dolce has always felt a connection to animals. She was an only child growing up and spent much time with her dog, who was definitely a family member. After college, while living in Philadelphia, she started a dog-walking company for income, and volunteered in her spare time working in shelters. "I just entered this world of both pet care and then animal welfare, so on both sides of it, taking care of owned animals, family pets and in the shelter system. I never came out of it. I entered it, and I've been there ever since. I just remember feeling that this was exactly where I should be, getting

Jessica and Hazel.

to spend my day with dogs outside and getting to connect with people within the shelter system that cared as much about animals as I did."

Her parents are both therapists. After she married, she and her husband moved to Maine, where she began working in shelters full-time. She thought she was better equipped than most to handle that as a career, but she was wrong. "I was really struck by how unprepared I was to do this work and humbled thinking that I had maybe a head-start. I had this background of just a really mental health, positive family and was in therapy and all the things that a lot of other people aren't fortunate enough maybe have access to them when they're younger and starting this work." It wasn't enough. She knew if she was struggling, others were too, but no one seemed to want to talk about it. People in general tend to be afraid to open up and talk about their emotions. Most just try to work harder and not think about it, which only works for so long. Dolce says "It's probably a smart move in the beginning, to approach it that way. But at a certain point, we need more. We outpace that technique of ignoring it and shoving it down and just keep going. There's a point where we can't ignore it anymore. Our body starts to shut down or we start to have really serious problems in our personal lives. We're forced to acknowledge it at some point. I would love for us to be able to do that sooner before we cause a lot of damage to ourselves and others in the process."

People who work with animals are not the only ones who suffer this way. All those in helping professions face similar problems, but the other helping professions generally have a better built-in support system. The difference with animals is – they can't speak for themselves. Often we project our own feelings onto them, which can exacerbate the situation. More importantly, though, "I think it's very emotionally challenging to be around animals who are suffering and really dependent on you. Animal care workers are really the only helping professionals who are consistently tasked with ending the lives of those that they provide care for, unless you're in a right-to-die state or country. Euthanasia is a really unique part of our work that most other helping professions don't have to experience. I think that also complicates things a lot for us."

Dolce does her education and coaching online, principally dealing with those who work with animals in shelters. In addition, she works with those in veterinary clinics, sanctuaries, wildlife rehab facilities, and others. She also teaches online at the University of Florida's shelter medicine program. Her focus is to give those she educates and coaches the skills to cope with the challenges facing them.

COVID-19 has made a difference in that more organizations are willing to invest in these types of programs. The needs are sometimes complex. "It's very important for individuals to take care of themselves. That is a big part of our resilience. We just can't be well, if we don't make the choice to care for ourselves. And that's also not going to be enough. We also need social support and organizations that create healthy working conditions for us. Our resilience is more than just our individual choices. It's also about the context that we're living and working in.

"I just would encourage individuals to do what they can with what they have control over, which is typically how they choose to care for themselves and the boundaries that they set and the support that they reach out to. Also understand that we need larger-scale change in terms of how our organizations function. It's not all on the individual. There is a responsibility within businesses and organizations to create working conditions, that better protect the humans doing the work because this work cannot be done without the human beings. It can't be outsourced. We depend on people and if we want our work to be done ethically, and effectively than we really need to consider the welfare of the humans doing the work."

Dolce is bringing hope to multitudes of animal workers in a myriad of caregiving roles. See her sidebar for practical self-care tips. You too can practice compassionate badassery.

For more information, visit:
jessicadolce.com

7 Rs of Reducing Compassion Fatigue (for individuals)

BY JESSICA DOLCE

1. **Recognize**: Helpers can become so focused on the animals we care for that we don't recognize our own warning signs that we're headed for trouble until we're in crisis. Start tracking changes in your behavior, in real time, so that you have the option to intervene for yourself sooner, rather than later. A simple way to do this is to identify the most obvious change in your behavior when your stress levels are high and then track changes week to week. For example, if you typically isolate yourself when you're very stressed, are you noticing any changes in the way you connect to others this week? If so, you might take action by doing some or all of the following:
2. **Regulate**: Learning to calm our overactive stress response is key to our wellbeing and our effectiveness on the job. When you recognize that your fight, flight, or freeze response has been activated by internal (thoughts, sensations, emotions) or external (sounds, smells, social interactions, tasks, etc.), triggers try to pause. Then calm your nervous system through practices such as focused breathing, grounding through your senses, soothing touch, movement, or connecting with a supportive person or resource. Pause and repeat these calming actions many times throughout the day, so that you feel better and can be a calming presence for others.
3. **Reconnect**: Research shows that resilient people ask for and accept help. No one can do this work alone. Decades of research also tells us that social support is one of the best ways to prevent, cope with, and recover from the harmful impacts of stress and trauma. Who supports you? It might be a colleague at work or in a different organization, a mentor, friend or family member, or a therapist. Animals, nature, and spiritual practices are supportive connections too. Make time to build or reconnect with these relationships and increase your circle of care.

Jessica working with Jack, *a shelter dog.* Photo credit: Bangor Daily News

4. **Restore**: Hallmark symptoms of both compassion fatigue and burnout are physical and emotional exhaustion. This profound depletion impacts our ability to regulate our emotions and think clearly. If you do nothing else, prioritize restoring your energy and tend to your basic biological needs. What would have the biggest impact for you right now: getting better quality sleep, drinking more water, moving stress out of your body through exercise or laughter, or eating nutritious foods? Pick one, then set aside some time and energy to meet that need.
5. **Recalibrate**: There will always be more animals and people who need help. If we want to stay engaged, then we need to approach the work at a sustainable pace - even though the needs are great and often urgent. Learning to set healthy boundaries is crucial to effective, ethical caregiving and activism. It's not selfish to set limits with work so that you can meet your own needs. Your wellbeing builds your capacity to make a meaningful impact for animals for the long haul.
6. **Refocus**: When we're stressed, our thoughts tend to become narrow, rigid, repetitive, and negative. Because our thoughts have the power to drain our energy and resilience, we must pay attention to the non-stop background chatter in our minds and intentionally shift our perspective towards thoughts and stories that sustain us instead. This may look like refocusing on what's in our control, fact-checking our assumptions, and reframing our thoughts so they're neutral and believable.
7. **Routine**: Feeling out of control is a major stressor for humans. We can create more stability and a sense of control in our lives by building supportive routines into our day. Additionally, decision fatigue is real and most of us are too depleted by day's end to make smart choices for ourselves. Do your future-self a favor and create simple routines, particularly in the morning and evening, that allow you to go on auto-pilot in a healthy way!