



Position Statement on Secondary Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Mental Health Support in
the Working Animals Industry

Version: 1.0

Commencement Date: 23 July 2025

Review Date: 23 June 2026

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Citation:

Working Animals Federation of Australia (WAFA), “Position Statement on Secondary Trauma,
Compassion Fatigue, and Mental Health Support in the Working Animals Industry”, Version 1.0
June 23, 2025, www.workinganimals.com.au/guidance

Introduction

The working animals industry plays a critical role in enhancing the lives of individuals with disabilities, supporting law enforcement, and assisting with various essential tasks that make our communities safer and more inclusive. However, the professionals who work in this field—trainers, handlers, veterinarians, animal behaviorists, and support staff—are often exposed to the challenges of caring for animals in distressing or high-pressure situations. As a result, the phenomenon of secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout has become an increasingly important issue in this field. It is vital that we recognize and address these concerns to ensure the well-being of our workforce and maintain the high standards of care for the animals we serve.

Understanding Secondary Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue are not unique to the working animals industry, but they are particularly relevant in our field due to the emotional and physical demands placed on those who care for working animals. Secondary trauma refers to the emotional and psychological toll experienced by individuals who are indirectly exposed to the trauma or suffering of others, such as witnessing the distress or pain of animals in need. Compassion fatigue, on the other hand, is a form of burnout that arises from the continuous caregiving of animals or individuals in distress, leading to emotional exhaustion, a diminished sense of empathy, and a decreased ability to provide effective care.

In the working animals field, these challenges manifest in various ways. Professionals who work with animals that have been rescued from abusive or neglectful situations, as well as those who train service animals to perform critical functions in life-or-death situations, often experience vicarious trauma. The nature of their work can expose them to the trauma of animals who have suffered injury, abuse, or abandonment. Similarly, working in high-stress environments, such as those with law enforcement or military animals, can also lead to heightened emotional stress and burnout.

For example, a trainer who works with a rescue dog may experience secondary trauma after witnessing the animal's fear-based behaviors and struggles to trust people due to past abuse. Similarly, handlers of service animals who witness the mental and emotional toll that a person with a disability may experience can also be vulnerable to compassion fatigue. Over time, these repeated emotional demands can erode one's mental and physical well-being if not appropriately managed.

The Need for Self-Care and Mental Health Support

Addressing secondary trauma and compassion fatigue requires a systemic and proactive approach, prioritizing the mental health and well-being of all individuals working with animals. The mental and emotional resilience of our workforce is crucial to maintaining high standards of care for the animals and ensuring the effectiveness of the working animals programs.

It is essential to foster a culture that encourages self-care, mental health awareness, and seeking help when needed. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and professionals in the working animals field should be equipped with the tools, training, and support necessary to navigate the emotional challenges of their roles. In recognition of this, we have made mental

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health care and supervision an integral part of the working environment for credentialed members of the industry.

Embedding Supervision for Credentialed Members

We recognize the importance of ongoing support and supervision in helping professionals manage the emotional challenges of their work. Supervision is an essential part of our commitment to fostering a healthy work environment. All credentialed members within the working animals industry are required to engage in regular supervision sessions with a qualified supervisor. This process provides a safe space to discuss the emotional challenges of their work, reflect on their experiences, and receive guidance on managing stress, trauma, and compassion fatigue.

Supervision is not just a tool for addressing challenges after they have arisen but also an opportunity to develop coping strategies, build emotional resilience, and create a support network within the workplace. It is a critical element in maintaining professional well-being and ensuring that the workforce remains emotionally and mentally healthy, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both the animals and the individuals they assist.

Requiring Mental Health First Aid Certification

To further support the mental health of our workforce, we have implemented the requirement that all staff members, particularly those directly involved in animal care or handling, complete a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course before enrolling in any certification programs and maintain this certification at all times. The ability to recognize signs of distress, both in colleagues and the animals we care for, is crucial in preventing mental health issues from escalating.

Mental Health First Aid training equips individuals with the skills to recognize early signs of mental health challenges, provide initial support, and connect people with the appropriate professional services. This training is essential not only for identifying and addressing issues like secondary trauma and compassion fatigue in oneself and others but also for creating a workplace culture where mental health is openly discussed and prioritized.

Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

Beyond supervision and Mental Health First Aid certification, we encourage a holistic approach to mental health support within the workplace. This includes regular access to counseling services, promoting open discussions about mental health, creating opportunities for staff to take regular breaks, and ensuring that workloads are manageable. A culture that values mental health, rather than stigmatizing it, fosters an environment where professionals feel empowered to seek help when they need it and take proactive steps to care for their mental well-being.

For instance, providing access to peer support groups or workshops focused on stress management, mindfulness, and coping strategies can help staff members build resilience and avoid burnout. Additionally, leaders within the industry should set an example by prioritizing their own self-care, encouraging a healthy work-life balance, and creating a supportive and empathetic workplace culture.

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A Collective Responsibility for Mental Well-Being

In conclusion, addressing secondary trauma and compassion fatigue within the working animals industry is not only a moral obligation but also a necessary step toward maintaining the high standards of care that the animals we work with deserve. We must collectively recognize the emotional toll this work can take and take proactive steps to provide the necessary support and resources for mental health.

By embedding regular supervision for credentialed members, requiring Mental Health First Aid training, and fostering a culture that values mental well-being, we ensure that our workforce is equipped to manage the emotional demands of their work. This holistic approach benefits not only the individuals working with animals but also the animals themselves, as a well-supported workforce is better able to provide the care and training needed to create positive outcomes.

Together, we can create a healthier, more sustainable working environment in which professionals feel supported, mentally resilient, and empowered to continue their important work in the working animals industry.

Document Control

Version	Date	Author	Change Description	Approved By
V1.0	23/07/2025	V. Solomon	Initial	C.Williams

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