For compassion fatigue to occur, a caregiving relationship must exist. The nature of this relationship must include a caregiver and one or more clients. The relationship must also include the exchange of empathy, emotions, and information between the caregiver and the client. There must be a strong desire on the part of the caregiver to help alleviate the suffering and pain of the client. In the absence of these variables, compassion fatigue will not occur. And, as a practical matter, no client improvement will occur. Those in the animal-care profession always have multiple clients—animals (owned or otherwise), the owners of the animals, and other involved humans. At the core of all of our work in the animal-care profession is the relationship that exists between us as helpers and the animals themselves. In the animal-care profession, this relationship is called the human-animal bond.

Veterinarians Stanley Diesch, R.K. Anderson, and William McCulloch and psychiatrist David McCulloch coined the term in 1977 (American Veterinary Medical Association 1998), following a 1975 study commissioned by the National Institutes of Health documenting “The Human Health Responsibilities of Veterinarians.” This study was the first official recognition of the triangular relationship among people, their veterinarians, and their pets (American Veterinary Medical Association 1998).
The concept and dynamic of the human-animal bond were first tested legally in a 1979 lawsuit (Corso vs. Crawford Dog and Cat Hospital. 415 N.Y.S. 2d 182 [1979]) in which a pet owner claimed “emotional distress” when an animal hospital switched the cremated remains of her pet with those of another. The court awarded the claimant $700. More important than the award, however, was that the courts established a national precedent, recognizing and giving value to the human-animal bond.

To fully understand the human-animal bond, key terms should be defined. These key terms are:

- **Bond**—“A thing or force that unites or restrains. A binding agreement. To hold or tie together. To connect or reinforce” (The Oxford Dictionary).
- **Relationship**—“The state or instance of being related, connected, or associated. The emotions associated between two people or entities” (The Oxford Dictionary).

The human-animal bond is defined as

[A] mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well being of both. This includes but is not limited to emotions, psychological and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment. (American Veterinary Medical Association 1998, n.p.)

During early discussions about the human-animal bond, much of the writing reflected anecdotal or case presentations. Then, in 1987 the National Institutes of Health (NIH) held a landmark technological assessment workshop examining the health benefits of human-animal interaction. The NIH recommended that further interdisciplinary, collaborative research look critically at the relationship among companion animals, people, and medicine (American Veterinary Medical Association 1998). This event was a milestone, marking the transition of the human-animal bond from a qualitative to a quantitative field.

Research into the human-animal bond as of 2005 was firmly rooted in science. In 2002 PAWSitive Inter Action published its research findings in a paper, entitled “A Scientific Look at the Human-Animal Bond” (PAWSitive Inter Action 2002). The authors were:

- Alan Beck, Sc. D., director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at the School of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University
Sandra Barker, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry and director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction, School of Medicine, Virginia Commonwealth University

Marty Becker, D.V.M., author of The Healing Power of Pets

Edward Cresgam, M.D., professor, the Mayo Clinic Medical School, American Cancer Society, professor of clinical oncology and The John and Roma Rouse professor of humanism in medicine.

Following the 1987 recommendations, PAWSitive Inter Action concluded that “science has officially weighed in on the human-animal bond and the evidence is clear. Research demonstrates that human-animal interaction benefits physical, emotional and psychological wellness” (PAWSitive Inter Action 2002, 9).

This study was limited to findings within the United States, but a more global view and understanding of the information was needed. In 2003 that information was provided by Bonnie Beaver, D.V.M. According to Beaver, “People throughout the world relate to animals on the basis of such factors as their society, culture, and personal values” (2003, 1). She adds that, in more developed countries, the human-animal bond is stronger as a result of basic human needs having been met and the existence of more disposable income to provide for animals (Beaver 2003).

As in any emotional relationship, the human-animal bond has both positive and negative aspects. How do we express the positive side of the human-animal bond? Seventy-eight percent of pet owners report that their pets greet them when they come home from work, but their spouses do not (Fucco 2002). Ninety-seven percent of pet owners report that their pets make them smile at least once a day; 76 percent believe that pets reduce stress; and 85 percent report that their pets show concern when they are sick (Fucco 2002).

The human-animal bond is not related to age. PAWSitive Inter Action concluded that

In an era of concern about the soaring price of medical care, the profit of the benefits of the human-animal bond has important implications for controlling costs and improving health in a growing population of senior
citizens. Indeed, policies that encourage pet ownership among the aged, either at home or as they make the transition to elder living facilities, can absolutely improve some medical conditions and alleviate loneliness. (2003, 9)

A. Arluke (in Winiarskyj 2001) posits that children ages eleven to sixteen can be “animal people.” Young people who have a strong self-image see relationships with animals as being reciprocal. The children reported “getting something back” for helping animals. Winiarskyj (2001) reported that children regularly exposed to animals have more empathy for animals than do those without such exposure.

Most of the research on the human-animal bond focuses on the positive aspect of the relationship; however, some reports focus on the negative side the relationship. The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association [n.d., n.p.] reports:

You cannot just tie a dog to the dog house, throw it a bone and expect bonding to occur. At the other extreme, people who treat their pets as surrogate children and overindulge their pet can produce a behavioral problem that is hard to control...Another side effect of the bond is the grief many people feel when they part with their pet. In preparing an answer for you, I consulted an animal behavior modification specialist. He noted that children’s grief is a special concern particularly when a pet must be euthanized or removed from the home...The relationship can be extremely beneficial but it can have problematic side effects. Most of us are willing to put up with some inconveniences. We also should be alert for serious problems that need correcting...

When the human-animal bond is broken by animal abuse, neglect, or torture, it is no wonder that those of us who are caregivers are moved to our own personal anger toward the perpetrator. Our anger gives way to our desire to help the suffering animal(s). It is this desire to help that leads us down the road of compassion fatigue.

We will examine various positions within the animal-care profession in an effort to understand compassion fatigue.