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Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

"Everyone drops out of vet school once they realize the career is mostly euthanasia." This is what my brother's friend, Josh (names changed) said to me after learning I want to be a veterinarian. I'm used to hearing skepticism because I've had this dream since I was six years old. Josh wasn't the first person to bring attention to this feature of veterinary medicine, and I started to wonder if I'd be able to handle the emotional stress, so I decided to test myself.

Since June, I've been working as a kennel assistant at a veterinary clinic. Josh was right about euthanasia being a prominent aspect of being a vet, but the challenges he alluded to were different from those I encountered. I thought being around euthanasia would create a highly emotional and volatile environment, but I was shocked by how desensitized my co-workers appeared.

My first exposure to euthanasia in the clinic was when a doctor casually announced: "Euthanasia on Tuesday." Everyone acknowledged the remark and moved on; it didn't seem to bother them. I felt guilty judging people whom I respected, but their lack of compassion disturbed me. However, as time went on, I learned there was more to the story.

Two months into my job, I was walking a French Bulldog when I ran into Al (one of the vet assistants) who seemed agitated. He told me that the family of a dog (who had been euthanized two days ago) called to ask for a fur clipping. Al described how traumatic it was to go into the freezer to get this memento. As he spoke, Al's tone went from matter-of-fact to solemn, and I could see that he was distraught. This was the first time I had spoken to a coworker about euthanasia, and I realized that I had misinterpreted their attitudes.

They weren't heartless or apathetic. They needed to develop survival techniques in order to cope with the emotional burdens they face on a daily basis. Remaining stoic and compartmentalizing the stress was one of these methods. Before working at the clinic, my perception of compassion was relatively one-note. I thought it meant being expressive and crying alongside someone who's suffering. I've since learned that compassion isn't about being the most emotive person in the room. Imagine a room full of crying veterinarians trying to perform a surgery--I wouldn't trust my dog with them.

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What I had mistook for indifference in my coworkers was really an elevated form of compassion. Sometimes being strong and remaining calm is the best way to help someone through grief. The fact that I was not able to recognize this initially demonstrates that I still have much to learn about the best way to conduct myself to support patients.

One of the biggest takeaways from working at the clinic was understanding that a major part of being a veterinarian is serving as a grief counselor for families. Not only do you have to cope with your own emotions, you must also offer comfort to the animals and their families. This requires self-sacrifice, as it is necessary to relegate your pain and suffering. Working at the clinic opened my eyes to the emotional intensity of this profession and motivates me to build the same strength my coworkers have. Over the past months, I've revised my definition of compassion, and I feel prepared to tackle all the different sides of veterinary medicine. My new interpretation of compassion applies not only to my patients but also to myself and my own grief. This translates to allowing myself to feel and to have conversations about difficult subjects so that I can redirect my emotions rather than suppress them. Being compassionate with myself brings me one step closer to being the veterinarian I've always wanted to be.