

# Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: Suffering and the Slaughterhouse Worker



by  
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Since the 1980s, there has been substantial research and funding put into learning more about how to treat PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Most people have heard of PTSD, common to victims of abuse, soldiers, and more. However, few are aware of a form of PTSD called PITS, or Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress. PITS is a psychological condition that can cause physiological changes in the body due to being responsible for consistently creating a traumatic situation for others. Unlike general PTSD, PITS affects those who feel forced to induce or cause trauma, rather than those that endure trauma. The individual suffering from PITS is “a casual participant” in creating a traumatic situation. This condition is widely seen amongst slaughterhouse workers who kill innumerable animals yearly to meet consumer demands.

As vegans, our first reaction upon hearing that we should sympathize and even advocate for these workers might be outrage. However, compassion for all is an essential practice in veganism, as is the reduction of suffering. It's our job to speak out for those whose voices aren't heard—especially when their torment facilitates animal suffering. Many slaughterhouse workers are exploited, abused, and suffer immensely, but lack options or representation. Like so many aspects of the animal food system, this, too, is hidden from the public eye: why is there so much awareness, for example, about PTSD in soldiers, but close to none about the high rate of PITS in the animal agriculture worker? Let's start there, and then get into the suffering they endure.

Slaughterhouses are disproportionately found in rural towns with [high immigrant and minority populations, and a very low average income and education level](#). These are the same places where other industrial polluters (landfills, coal plants, toxic waste dumps) are located. The [Factory Farming Awareness Coalition](#) found that about 72% of farm workers are not born in the US. Only a third of factory farm workers are US citizens, and nearly half — about 48% — do not have legal authorization to work in this country. Individuals who “choose” to work in a slaughterhouse do so primarily due to lack of opportunity or exposure to other options. It's work that isn't hard to get: Many slaughterhouses do not require citizenship authentication or a specific level of education. They also employ a high volume of formerly incarcerated people because the lack of requirements makes it easier to be hired with a criminal record. It's no coincidence that so many factory farms and slaughterhouses are in economically disadvantaged regions nor that they make employment so easy. Animal ag preys on desperate people. They then increase their profit by paying low salaries: [nearly half of slaughterhouse workers live below 200% of the poverty line](#). Very few people would choose to be put through the mentally and emotionally torturous environment of killing to barely make a living.

PITS among slaughterhouse workers is brushed under the rug because it affects the disenfranchised: black, brown, and immigrant populations; those with little education, money, or exposure to a better life. And its no wonder why: Public discourse on the subject would definitely affect the bottom line for some of the US's most profitable companies.

Let's take a closer look at how PITS ingrains itself in the minds of slaughterhouse workers.

In the United States, **9 billion animals are slaughtered each year** to meet consumer demands. That means over 1 million animals are slaughtered every single hour. Take a second to let those values sink in. Your heart beats about 100,000 times a day, every day, all day. Compare that to 1 million animals that are killed every single hour. The demanding rate at which slaughterhouse workers must kill outpaces the human heart, by far. Workers are expected to use a bolt gun on 2500 animals a day: **that's one cow every 12 seconds**. How can the brain even process what it's doing that quickly?

Slaughterhouse workers go through **four different stages** as their minds learn to cope and protect themselves from the horrific duties they are expected to perform, duties that go against human instinct. Stage one involves adjusting to the actual slaughterhouse environment: the putrid animal remains, fluids, and feces that they will begin smelling miles before they arrive at the facility, and continue smelling long after they leave, as they typically become filthy with gore while working in the factory. During Stage one, they also learn how NOT to kill themselves using some of the most dangerous equipment in any field. The slaughterers work directly with or right next to industrial-size metal shop machinery designed to tear flesh apart.



*There's a reason slaughterhouses don't have glass walls. New employees are warned that they may faint the first day from the sights and smells. Photo credit: GlobalNews.Ca*



*Doomed chickens being unloaded from a truck to a slaughterhouse. The process is like a factory line, and the machines stop for nothing. Photo credit: JoAnn McArthur, WeAnimalsMedia*

Injuries are common and significant in slaughterhouses and meat-packing facilities. Two examples include when “an employee was attempting to remove the ribs from the spine of a cattle rib set, his hand made contact with a running vertical band saw and two of his fingers were amputated,” and, “a worker was reaching down to pick up a box to clear a jam when his jacket became caught in a roller. As he tried to pull it out, his hand got pulled in as well. His hand and lower arm were crushed.” In fact, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) states there are an average of 17 “severe” injuries in meat-processing plants across the US each month. To be considered “severe,” an injury must require hospitalization, or result in amputation or the loss of an eye.

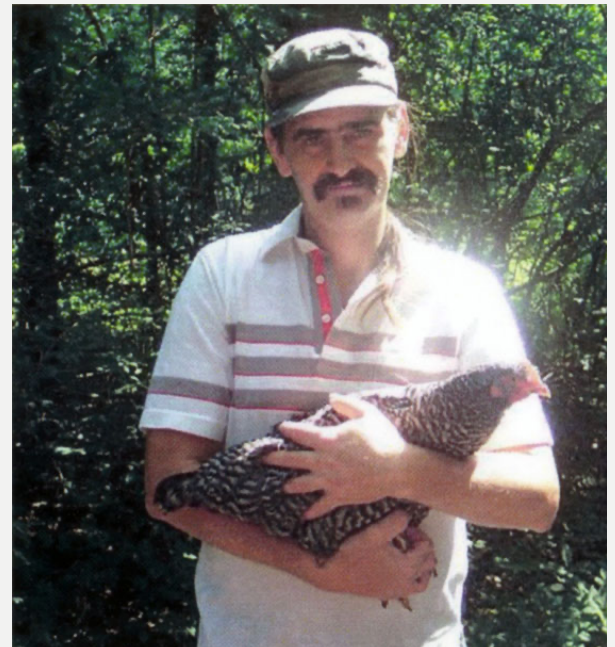
Anything less is so frequent, it's not worth the trouble.



Stage two and three involves coping with and maintaining the actual workload. Slaughterers must adjust to the fast pace and demanding nature of their jobs. With so many animals to kill in one shift, usually more than any one person can manage, they are not allowed breaks. Previous slaughterhouse workers have come forward to talk about the terrible conditions to which they were subjected. Those conditions involved inhumane rules, such as the prohibiting of bathroom breaks. Workers were—and still are—encouraged to wear diapers so they do not slow down the production line—resulting in a loss of profit. Even in grammar schools, where children must ask to use the bathroom, it is frowned upon for a teacher to refuse them. But some do. Now imagine the level of apathy an adult must succumb to before they become okay with wearing a diaper. Not because it is physically needed, but because another adult has forbidden them from expressing a basic human function. These fully grown adults get abused by ruthless large companies like Tyson and Sanderson Farms because they know the workers need their jobs to survive, or support families; Because so many of them fall below the radar, they can abuse them.

Once the physical stress becomes bearable, the pace and conditions can no longer distract. Stage 4 begins: workers try to cope with the fallout of the psychological and social consequences of their jobs. Imagine you must somehow accept that every day, you are the cause of suffering and death for another living being. That every day, repeatedly, for hours on end without break, you must ignore the fear and pain you cause in one animal and move on to do the same to another. Slaughterhouse workers must compartmentalize their emotions and their job to survive. They must view animals as a commodity, as a piece of money, as a lifeless being. If they do not, then they will have to realize they purposefully kill other sentient beings all day, every day. The pace at which workers are forced to operate doesn't just help with profit. It also prevents them from thinking too deeply about what they're doing. But once they realize that they are creating this hell, this unimaginably terrifying and undeserved death for the animals...that's when PITS can get a strong grasp on the person.

In a well-documented case, a former slaughterhouse worker - turned-animal-activist named Virgil Butler was employed as a slaughterer for many years, including five years spent with Tyson Chicken. As a person who grew up in a rural environment, he was no newcomer to killing animals for food. However, when he worked for Tyson, he realized just how awful our current food system is. He exposed many of the wrongdoings that major animal meat companies get away with daily, to both their animals and their workers. In great detail, he described how animals would nuzzle up to him and other workers—like a dog would—seconds before he or another worker would slit their throat. However, to work such a dehumanizing, spiritually deadly job, they forced themselves to dissociate from the loving creatures they were traumatizing and murdering, to forget that they, and the animals they killed, had emotions. They needed to become numb to the core; to not care how they treated others—or how others treated them. The environment, the constant fear, pain, and death at their hands...Virgil's co-workers sacrificed their mental health and would live the rest of their lives with PITS, all to meet demands for meat.



*Virgil Butler, former slaughterhouse worker and current animal advocate, with a chicken he rescued.*  
Photo credit: The Ant's Meow

Like PTSD, PITS is an unbearable condition to live with. For slaughterhouse workers, it's either save themselves by checking out and shutting down while they work or forfeit their full sanity by letting reality break through the cracks, forcing them to acknowledge that they are perpetuating a torturous environment for thousands of animals every day that they show up at work. In Jennifer Dillard's piece on psychological harm, she cites a paper in which Virgil Butler recounts a fellow worker being "hauled off to the mental hospital" for the violent, recurring nightmares so many of them suffered.

Dissociation by day, nightmares about reality by night: PITS is a recipe for developing substance abuse disorders. One former hog-sticker (an employee who stabs the hogs to cause them to bleed to death) stated that “[a] lot of [the slaughterhouse hog killers] have problems with alcohol. They have to drink, they have no other way of dealing with killing live, kicking animals all day long. If you stop and think about it, you’re killing several thousand beings a day.” Other symptoms of PITS include anxiety, panic, depression, increased paranoia, a sense of disintegration, dissociation or amnesia. In one study on the “Sinclair Effect” (named after Upton Sinclair, author of *The Jungle*), it was found that employment at slaughterhouses increases the rate of total arrests, as well as arrests for violent crime, and sexual offenses including rape. A lack of control over one’s life, and normalizing violence and bloodshed may be the driving forces behind these crimes.

Even as the trauma goes unprocessed, most of those who need help most do not get it. Most have only the most basic education and training. They do not make a lot of money, and often have limited resources within a family—mental health is not a priority, and the care of it, not an option. Due to the little to no representation and knowledge we have about slaughterhouse workers and the conditions they face every day, their struggles do not receive the same help and attention as soldiers or victims of violence. These workers are not given the resources they need, nor are they thought of as victims of the very system they help keep running—which they are.

As vegans, it can be tempting to cast blame upon those in the system, disparage them with a haughty “I would NEVER.” But to be truly empathetic, we need to acknowledge that our abilities, education, and experiences as children and adults are not all the same. Slaughterhouse workers who do not know any other choice but to work in such a terrible environment are exploited, abused, dehumanized, and suffer mentally and physically. They are animals—human animals, and as such deserve the compassion that is the basis of veganism. If a



*Everyday, workers like this one must dissociate mentally to perform a job that goes against human nature, while being dehumanized themselves. The animal agriculture industry destroys and kills. Photo Credit: David Taffa via Million Dollar Vegan*

person’s employment causes them to suffer from debilitating mental health crises, they need help. At the end of the day, we all deserve the same care.

And, at the end of the day, compassion aside, jamming a cog in the machinery of a system that subjugates non-human and human animals—animal agriculture—moves us one step closer to the goal of a vegan world.

The ultimate goal of veganism sees a world without slaughterhouses, without meat, and without dairy or any other exploitative industry. Until that time, all who are hurt, exploited—indeed destroyed—by animal agriculture need to be cared for. We can create positive change to help prevent systemic abuse that causes mental illness in already disenfranchised people. We must be their voice, as we are the voice for the animals in the system. In doing so, we move closer to our goal by breaking the current cruel and unsustainable food systems in place. We can each take steps in our own lives so that we can keep working towards a more positive world for ourselves, and all the other animals who call it home.