

A View from the Edge: Challenges to Veterinary Wellbeing

Laurie E. Fonken, Ph.D., LPC

Objectives

- Define current trends and challenges to veterinary wellbeing.
- Identify specific personal and professional challenges.
- Begin to form a plan for sustainability based on specific challenges.

Introduction

Veterinary professionals are highly committed and dedicated individuals who work hard to care for their patients, clients, colleagues, and communities. For those who devote their lives to the service of others, the physical, emotional, and spiritual demands of the work, while rewarding, can lead to exhaustion. Day to day work expectations and pressures can at times feel overwhelming and isolating and have detrimental effects on personal and professional well-being. Understanding trends and challenges and finding ways to address these can help practitioners strengthen healthy practices for sustainability.

Current Research Findings

The recently released Executive Summary of the 2021 Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study III and Veterinary Support Staff Study found 92% of the 2,493 veterinarian and 448 veterinary staff respondents rated increased stress as one of their top mental health challenges while 88% cited student debt and concerns about the risk of suicide as main stressors for veterinary professionals. Effects of the pandemic were seen in that more than 90% of respondents reported shortages of qualified veterinary staff and 68% highlighted the difficulty of providing services during the pandemic. Pandemic-related concerns included difficulty finding enough staff, employees spending time away from work due to illness and family care, and anxiety around the risk of increased exposure to Covid 19. For those who were able to work, increased hours were another contributor to stress. More than 90% of both veterinarians and veterinary support staff believe the shortage of qualified veterinary professionals to be among the most critical challenges facing the profession.

In this third of three studies completed by Merck (the first in 2017 and the second in 2019), the number of veterinarians reporting serious psychological distress grew 3.3% from 2019 at 6.4% to 9.7% in 2021. 18.1% of veterinary staff reported being in serious psychological distress nearly twice the percentage reported in 2019. High burnout levels were reported at 30.5% for veterinarians and 49.6% for veterinary staff. Workload and excessive work hours continue to be among the main contributors to serious psychological distress and burnout. Veterinarians under 50 years of age had lower wellbeing. Only 56.5% of veterinarians and 50.2% of veterinary staff reported they were flourishing in their work. Food animal and equine practitioners had higher levels of wellbeing than mixed and companion animal practitioners.

Similar to the findings in 2019, only 47% of veterinarians said they would recommend the profession to others, citing the cost of becoming a veterinarian compared to income level and stress of the profession as the main reasons. 18% of respondents said they regretted becoming a veterinarian. 1 in 5 said they were likely to leave the profession within the next 2 years.

Veterinary staff were more apt to leave the profession in the next 2 years with 31% stating plans to leave their employment.

Trends and Challenges

In May of 2019, the World Health Organization added burn-out to the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon and defined it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” It is characterized by three dimensions: “1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and 3) reduced professional efficacy. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life².”

Concepts and Terms

Pathological Altruism: Causing physical and/or psychological harm to oneself by placing the needs of others above oneself.

Burnout: Inefficacy and feeling overwhelmed, hopeless. Cumulative work demands and stress.

Secondary Trauma or Vicarious Trauma: Exposure to others’ pain and suffering creates a sense that the trauma has happened to you.

Empathic Distress: Self-oriented emotions which arise when empathizing with the suffering of another person can lead to strong feelings of distress and aversive emotions in the observer. Unregulated empathy becomes problematic as it causes a desire to withdraw from the situation causing the suffering.

Compassion Fatigue: “Compassion Fatigue is a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress. It is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper.” - Dr. Charles Figley. S A state of reduced capacity for compassion as a consequence of being exhausted from absorbing the suffering of others.

Horizontal and Vertical Hostility: Behavior that controls, devalues, disrespects and/or diminishes another peer group.

Moral Distress: Feelings provoked by the real or perceived violation of one’s moral or ethical beliefs. Can include issues of fairness, respect, and commitment to care.

Compassion: The feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to attend to and relieve that suffering. Feelings of concern FOR another. Two Dimensions: 1) the affective feeling of caring for a suffering person and 2) the motivation to relieve the others person’s suffering

Compassion Satisfaction: Positive aspects of working as a helper caring for others. Compassion makes us feel good: Compassionate action (e.g., giving to charity) activates pleasure circuits in the brain, and compassion training programs, even very brief ones, strengthen brain circuits for pleasure and reward and lead to lasting increases in self-reported happiness.

Empathy: Our ability to take the perspective of, and feel the emotions of another person. Feeling WITH or INTO the other, sharing the same feeling with another person. Taking the suffering on as if it were yours.

Resilience: The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity. The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

Self-Compassion: Extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering. Kristin Neff has defined self-compassion as being composed of three main components – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Key elements to address the challenges of the Edge States begin with identification and acknowledgement of how they are impacting individuals and organizations and then working to address them. This will require leadership, involvement of team members, transparency, and accountability. Developing a healthy level of altruism and empathy, creating an environment of respect and engagement, and working from a place of openness and integrity are necessary. These will not happen without dialogue and discussion in a safe and trusted space.

Identifying where the disengagement is taking place is key to finding a way to address it. The six areas of burnout are:

- 1) Workload: Is the workload sustainable?
- 2) Control: How much control does one have over their work and working environment?
- 3) Reward: How are individuals recognized or rewarded for their efforts?
- 4) Community: How do individuals in the practice come together, collaborate, and engage?
- 5) Fairness: How are individuals treated, how are policies applied?
- 6) Value: How does the work you do and the service you provide correspond with your ethical and moral values? (Leiter, M and Maslach C, 2005)

The elements of burnout are in line with the Edge States discussed. Some must be addressed at the personal level and some at the organizational and professional level. It is important to do both. If your work does not align with your morals and values, it can become less meaningful. If the workload is not addressed, the personal costs can be high with exhaustion, physical illness, and despair. Taking a personal inventory, an honest look at where you are, is the first step toward moving forward in a healthy and sustainable way. With the rise in suicides, substance use, anxiety, and depression now is the time. It begins with each individual and from there it can spread out to the community as a whole.

Resources and References

Volk JO, Schimmack, U., Strand, E., et al. Executive Summary of the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study III and Veterinary Support Staff Study. *J of the Am Vet Med Assoc*, Online Publication Date July 1, 2022, Vol. 260 Issue 12.

World Health Organization, Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases, (2019) Departmental News, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.

Figley CR, Roop RG. (2006) Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community. Humane Society Press. Washington, DC.

Halifax, J (2018) *Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet*, Flatirons Press.

Leiter, M and Maslach C, (2005) *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving your Relationship with Work*, Jossey Bass.

McGrath, M., Oakley, B., (2012) *Pathological Altruism*, Oxford University Press, Editors: Barbara Oakley.

Neff, K. (2015) *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, Harper Collins, New York, NY.