

## **Living Between the Lines: Life, Work, and Wellbeing**

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### **Objectives**

- Define current trends and challenges to veterinary wellbeing.
- Identify specific stress triggers and personal ways to complete the stress cycle.
- Become familiar with elements of a wellbeing practice and the self-care equation.
- Define concepts of boundary setting and working from personal and professional areas of strength.
- Begin to form a plan for sustainability in practice and integration of work and life.

### **Introduction**

The practice of veterinary medicine is complex; with the numerous rewards come challenges not faced in other professions. Growing workloads and client expectations along with the student debt to income ratio disparity make it difficult at times to navigate life, work, and wellbeing. In this presentation, we will explore current research, look at stress and anxiety, and set healthy boundaries to sustain a healthy practice.

### **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 at 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. 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.

### **Trends and Challenges**

Factors challenging the health and wellbeing of veterinary professionals are complex and interwoven. Compassion fatigue is a state experienced when one is feeling the impact of burnout, defined above, and secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is when exposure to others' pain and suffering creates a sense that the trauma has happened to you. The combination of these factors leads to a reduced capacity for engagement as a consequence of exhaustion from being with suffering. Moral distress refers to feelings provoked by the real or perceived violation of one's moral or ethical beliefs and can include issues of fairness, respect, and commitment to care<sup>3</sup>. Decision fatigue is "a psychological phenomenon surrounding a person's ability or capacity to make decisions<sup>4</sup>." When one experiences decision fatigue, the ability to make decisions can get

worse as the brain will be more fatigued. This fatigue applies to all decisions, not simply the large or more difficult ones. Most strategies and tools for intervention exist at the individual and working group level. It is important to note that burnout, as a phenomenon, directly relates to the workplace, and must be acknowledged and dealt with by organizations and institutions as they have a primary role in creating the situational factors inherent in it.

### **Stress and the Stress Cycle**

Stress and stressful events (stressors) are an inevitable and unavoidable part of life. Often we have no control over the events that lead us to the experience of stress; what we can control is our response to the stressor. Dealing with a particular stressor is different than dealing with our stress response. Stress is a neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter what is perceived to be a threat. It can be an external threat (lion) or an internal threat (self-criticism, belief you are a failure) Stress is an evolutionary response meant to keep us safe from harm by triggering a physiological response which is meant to help us survive. A stressor is anything that activates a stress response in us. The hit-by-car that comes through the door initiates a response where we jump into action; our thinking mind starts to analyze the situation, assess, diagnose, and make a plan of action. Our physiology kicks in hormones that help us take physical action to deal with the situation, we move in a way that will help the patient. We focus on what is necessary in that moment to deal with that situation. Once the stress response is triggered and the hormones and endorphins flood our body, we are able to deal with the stressor. The issue comes when the stress response continues after the stressor is dealt with. The situation is handled and yet our physiology is still in a stress response. Adrenaline, cortisol, and glycogen are still in the system, the body is still in action mode. It takes time to complete the stress cycle and it takes a conscious action.

Completing the stress cycle may bring up emotions after the threat is gone, the hit-by-car is in recovery and you are overcome with relief, tears, physiological shaking, agitation, and possibly the inability to relax or sleep. Going from 100 mph down to 10 mph you need time to decelerate. We get stuck in the stress cycle when we are in an environment with chronic stressors, stuck in a stress-activating situation. This is not necessarily bad unless the stress outpaces the capacity for one to process it.<sup>5</sup> What happens in veterinary medicine is that we are faced with one stress after another and there is no time to complete one stress cycle before the next one is triggered. Once the stressor has passed, having a plan for release of the physiological energy and emotion connected with it are necessary so you can continue on with what is ahead. Completing the stress cycle is not an intellectual process, it is a physiological one and involves actually doing something. This may be physical activity, walking, stretching, getting outside, or calling a debrief with the team (time set aside to share how things went, how people are doing, and what they might need), or spending some time in a quiet space to do some deep breathing or writing. Whatever you choose it is important to know the stress will remain in your body until you have taken time to release it.

### **Boundaries**

Have you ever heard good fences make good neighbors? A fence is a boundary. It delineates where one property ends, and another begins. Dr. Henry Cloud clearly and simply explains how fences are important for keeping things in one space and other things out of that space. Fences are functional. If your neighbor has a tree that falls over the fence into your yard it may become

something you have to deal with<sup>6</sup>. Healthy boundaries, like good fences, help keep in what you would like and keep out what does not serve. By keeping the boundaries you set for yourself, it lets others know that you value yourself and take responsibility for your wellbeing and that you trust them to do the same for themselves.

We teach people how to treat us by the way we treat ourselves. Others learn from watching us what is acceptable behavior toward us. If we continually stretch our boundaries to meet others' needs, they will see this. As we know, actions speak louder than words. Every time we say one thing and do another, we teach others it is okay to do the same. Setting healthy boundaries is hard and yet if we say it, we must do it. The short-term default for many to set unhealthy boundaries means that while the short-term discomfort of asserting yourself and saying no is avoided, the negative feelings of frustration, resentment and ultimately exhaustion linger on. These situations and the feelings that go with them affect not only the relationships you have with others, but also contribute to your individual burnout.

Our relationships with people differ depending on the setting. We have professional relationships and personal relationships. Clearly identifying the type of relationship you have with another can help with boundary setting. Consider your role in the relationship. In professional relationships, boundaries are expected and necessary for you to do the work you need to do in the manner consistent with your professional responsibilities<sup>7</sup>. Respecting professional boundaries is key to the structure and operation of your practice.

What are the barriers to setting healthy boundaries? These may vary from individual to individual and include internal as well as external barriers. Internal barriers are personal beliefs about work and roles. We each have a work ethic and standards we set for ourselves. External barriers include the culture of the environment within which we work, as well as the spoken and unspoken expectations and norms set there. Understanding our personal work ethic and the cultural expectations can help us to assess if there is a match or mismatch. Awareness and open communication about these expectations and the impact they have on teams is essential.

Step one in setting healthy boundaries is believing we deserve to focus on our own health and wellbeing and to see ourselves with the same compassion we show others. Self-compassion includes 1) self-kindness - we must eliminate the judgments and messages in our minds that put us down, 2) common humanity- we must remember that, just like me, someone else would find this situation difficult, and 3) mindfulness- we must separate the issue from self, we are not what we did or what happened, we are who we are<sup>8</sup>.

“No.” Is a complete sentence. Let’s acknowledge that many of us have difficulty saying “No.” Some of us can say the initial “no” and then feel compelled to explain, defend, rationalize, or compromise the “no”. For our boundaries to be respected we must respect ourselves by sticking with our “no” as is. We do not need to explain everything to everyone. “No.” is a fine response.

Tips for setting healthy boundaries include acknowledging you are worthy of time off and self-care. Meeting your physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social needs is important to your overall health and wellbeing. Setting limits is essential when we are in situations of ethical and moral stress, as well as at times we need to step back, renew, and refocus. Clarity is a critical

element in boundary setting. Make sure you are specific, confident, and clear about your limits and expectations. Lack of clarity leads to misunderstanding which leads to different expectations and often negative outcomes. Finally, consistency is key. If you set a boundary and expect others to respect it, you also need to respect it. Remember we teach people how to treat us by the way we treat ourselves. Consistency is a sign of professionalism and respect for self and others<sup>9</sup>.

### **Strategies Supporting Wellbeing: The Self Care Equation $X \geq Y$**

In this equation you and your health and wellbeing are the **X**. Everyone and everything else is the **Y**. Like the oxygen mask on the airplane, you are responsible for placing your mask on first before assisting others. If you are not accountable to your own health and wellbeing, the responsibility may fall to others. There will be times when the Y has to come first, but these should be the exception not the rule.

Identifying and naming your challenges can help you find ways to deal with or overcome them. Common strategies for individuals include development of coping skills and setting boundaries, as well as conflict and time management. Assessing the potential to change work patterns such as working less, taking more breaks, job sharing, or avoiding overtime work. In addition, building a strong community of support both at work and outside have been found to support wellbeing. Finally, utilizing relaxation techniques and promoting good health through eating, fitness, and sleep provide a strong foundation of health, wellbeing, and self-care which can be helpful when faced with the challenges of work.

Engagement has been identified as the positive counterpart to the challenges described above. Examples include:

- Engagement with the meaning and purpose of your work
- Connection to the calling which brought you to veterinary medicine
- Involvement with colleagues, clients, and patients
- Giving back to the community
- Having a sense of efficacy and connection to the deeper value in the work you do

Each of these has the ability to set a foundation of protection when facing professional challenges.

Fostering compassion, satisfaction, and self-compassion helps one focus on the positive aspects of working as a helper that cares for others and oneself. Compassion makes us feel good and compassionate action activates pleasure circuits in the brain. In a 2015 article on sources of satisfaction in veterinary professionals, Martin Cake and colleagues found seven elements that contributed to a life of meaning: helping and healing animals, grateful clients, interesting and varied job, lifelong learning, educating others, and financial rewards<sup>10</sup>.

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