



AAHA's Guide to ***Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing***



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by Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (EMERITUS)

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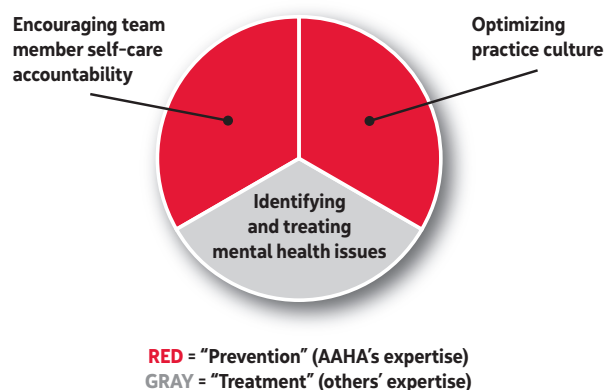
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An Open Letter to the Veterinary Profession

Dear Colleagues,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am excited to share with you some great news related to the American Animal Hospital Association's strategic direction. Historically, the AAHA Board of Directors has identified a "Mega Issue" to keep us focused on important issues facing our members and our profession. The AAHA Board has identified "promoting professional wellness" as its Mega Issue and intends to direct significant energy and resources in that direction.

The challenge of achieving professional wellbeing is recognized as a critical issue within the veterinary profession. From my purview, most of the efforts to address these challenges have focused on recognizing and treating problems (like depression, burnout, compassion fatigue, addiction, and suicidal ideation) by identifying support resources for affected individuals.



I am proud to announce that AAHA is launching a major initiative to address wellbeing from an alternative perspective that utilizes a positive, proactive approach to help *prevent* or mitigate mental health issues in veterinary practice teams. We intend to do this by encouraging practice team members to embrace the benefits of self-care and to provide practices with the resources to optimize their workplace culture.

AAHA will provide practices a pathway to design and build an optimal, customized, healthy culture. We believe this type of culture fosters individual and practice wellbeing while empowering team members to create harmony and satisfaction in their personal and professional lives. AAHA's long-term aspiration is to help prevent problems before they become a crisis and to help practices develop cultures that are so good, employees can find *refuge* at work from life's challenges.

AAHA has always defined excellence in veterinary care. Now we want to extend that to include excellence in

workplace culture and team member wellbeing. While improving practice culture is not an easy process and doesn't happen overnight, the payoff to the practice will be substantial. Personally, I have seen the positive impact that cultural transformation has on businesses and am honored to be part of positive change for veterinary practice teams.

We believe the investment in creating a more harmonious workplace will do the following:

- **Decrease employee turnover** by increasing employee satisfaction
- **Increase staff productivity** due to improved engagement, processes, and communication
- **Help prevent or mitigate serious mental health crises**
- **Improve individual wellbeing** by inspiring team members to find more purpose in the profession they love

Most importantly, a healthier practice culture will improve patient care and client satisfaction.

I have often said it is great to work for an organization that makes the world a better place. If we at AAHA are doing our jobs well, we help our accredited practices achieve excellence in medicine, patient care, and client care, and now, practice team member care. Patient care improves, clients are happier, the human-animal bond thrives, practice team members achieve higher degrees of personal and professional satisfaction, and we suddenly have more smiling people and healthy, happy pets . . . which ultimately makes the world a better place.

To further cultivate your understanding of the importance of self-care and cultural transformation, I am pleased to invite you to read this booklet, *AAHA's Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*, written by various experts in the field of personal wellbeing and culture. Please share this with your colleagues. We hope it serves as a springboard for discussion and leads to action that will make a difference in your personal and professional lives.

Sincerely,

Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM

Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus)
CEO, American Animal Hospital Association

Chapter 1.

Why Veterinary Caregivers May Be Predisposed to the Challenge of Finding Joy and Fulfillment in Our Profession

Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline Practice), MA, LPC

SHORT-CIRCUITING THE HARDWIRING OF VETERINARY TEAM MEMBERS

Much attention has been given to the apparent increased risk for mental health issues among veterinarians and support staff. A recent report by Nett et al.¹ found U.S. veterinarians at greater risk for mental illness, suicidal thoughts, and depressive episodes than the general population. Statistically, females are at greater risk than males for depression and suicidal thoughts, so the increased reporting of these occurrences among veterinarians may be a reflection of the larger number of women now in the profession.

Also, there is additional interest in whether veterinarians have suffered more early traumatic events than other groups and how this might impact mental health. These “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) include highly dysfunctional, chaotic families; abuse (verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual); and insecure attachment patterns with early caregivers. Increasingly, researchers are considering whether veterinarians as a group are “hardwired” differently from those in other health care professions. If so, mental health issues in veterinarians may be the result of a vulnerable individual in a provocative environment.

PERFECTIONISM SPARKS FAILURE

One of the more common “hardwired” characteristics with which many veterinary team members regularly self-identify is perfectionism. To be clear, perfectionism is *not* the feeling that one should always strive to do their best under given circumstances; rather, it is the relentless and irrational belief that anything less than a perfect outcome is a personal defeat and failure. Perfectionism is considered an “early maladaptive



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: Veterinary professionals may be more predisposed to mental health challenges than the general population. By recognizing this potential predisposition, practice team members can take specific, positive actions to help improve their mental health and wellbeing.

schema,” an unhelpful thought pattern established in childhood through interactions with key adults. While perfectionism has some perceived benefits, such as assisting academic achievement, the ever-operating internal critic of the perfectionist relentlessly pushes for a level of achievement not possible in our imperfect world. Especially in veterinary medicine, where the clinician’s desire to help is often thwarted by the realities of client finances or ability to pursue diagnostics and treatments, unchecked perfectionism is particularly malevolent and emotionally damaging.

THE 3 S’s OF REWIRING VETERINARY TEAMS

Despite perfectionism pervading our profession, there are several ways veterinary teams can work toward improving their mental health:

1. **Self-compassion**, the ability to treat ourselves in times of distress as a good friend would, is key to ameliorating perfectionism. This nonshaming stance, which realizes that one can only do what time and resources permit, needs to be not only modeled early in professional education but included in the day-to-day operations of our veterinary hospitals as well. While it might seem that self-compassion



leads to complacency and decreased standards, research shows otherwise. With a self-compassionate stance, high standards are maintained; intrinsic motivation is increased; there is less fear of failure, so one persists in a given effort; and there is more personal responsibility for previous mistakes. Self-compassion is key to building the personal resilience and emotional wellbeing necessary for sustainable professional and personal satisfaction.

2. **Self-care** can make a real difference in day-to-day resilience. Practical lifestyle changes like incorporating mindfulness and gratitude, practicing yoga, and improving sleep hygiene are remarkably effective. Additional information on these topics is available in this booklet.
3. **Support:** There are times when self-compassion and self-care aren't enough. We need to be open and willing to receive additional help. Supporting and destigmatizing the pursuit of enhanced mental health through psychotherapy and psychiatric care for veterinarians is critically important. It should be clear to all that no one can or should "white knuckle" emotional illness in isolation and that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Hopefully, understanding these predispositions will give caregivers permission to prioritize self-compassion, self-care, and seeking support to help improve their mental health and wellbeing.

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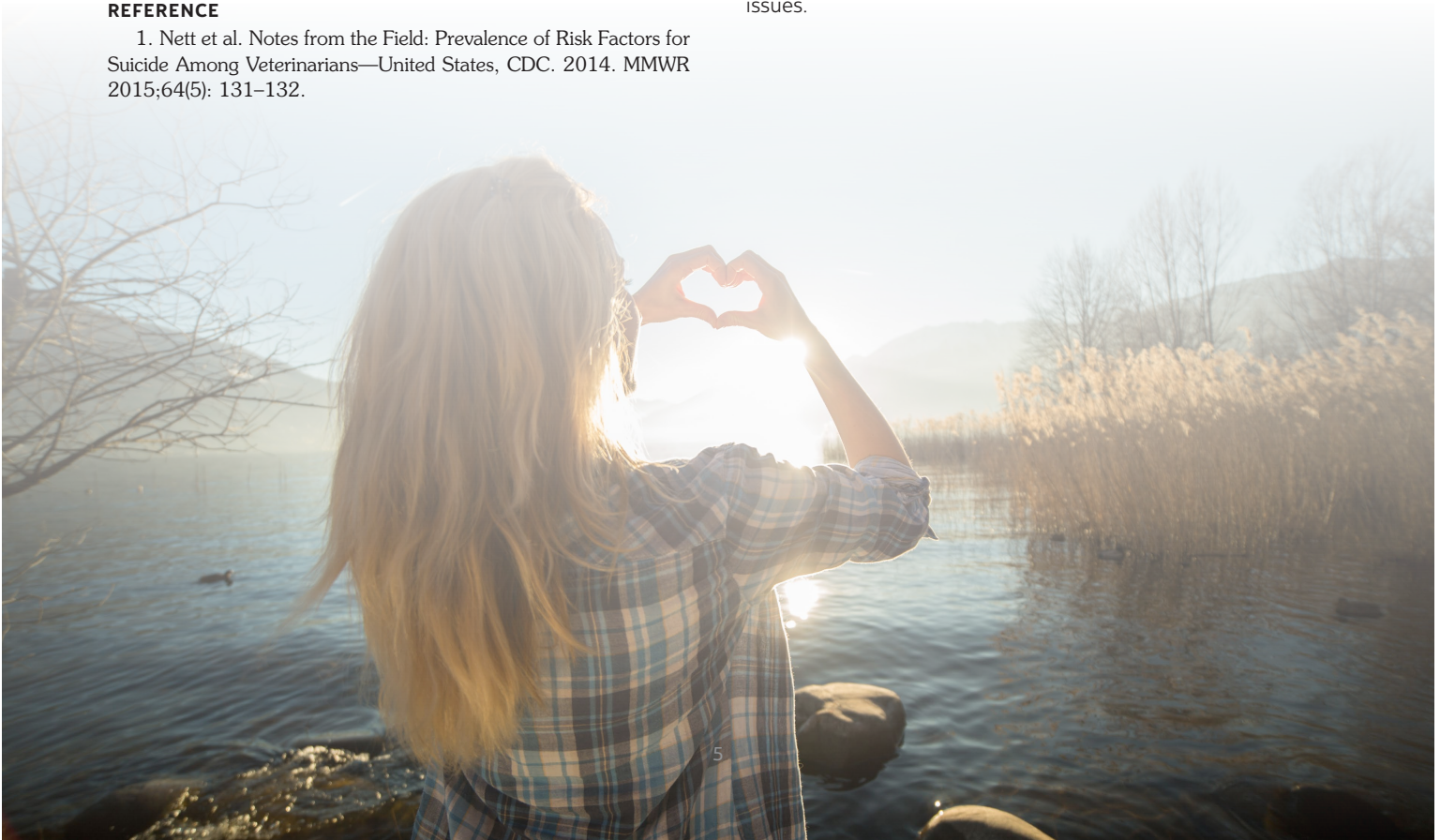
HOW TO GET STARTED

- ✓ **Explore the “Center for Mindful Self-Compassion” website** (www.self-compassion.org) created by Dr. Kristin Neff, an internationally recognized researcher on the practice and benefits of self-compassion.
 - Watch the TEDx video “The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion” at a staff meeting.
 - Follow the Guided Meditations on Self-Compassion (<http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#guided-meditations>).
- ✓ **Watch “Why Mindfulness Matters in Health Care Professions”** (https://youtu.be/izS_27ewXH0) by Ronald Epstein, MD, and share with your team.
- ✓ **Read *Attending: Medicine, Mindfulness, and Humanity*** by Ronald Epstein, MD.



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DR. MICHELE GASPAR cares for pets and people as a practicing board-certified feline specialist and psychotherapist. She serves as a consultant in feline internal medicine for the Veterinary Information Network (VIN) and is a member of Vets4Vets, a service of the VIN Foundation that helps veterinary students and veterinarians with professional and personal issues.



Chapter 2.

Practical Lifestyle Changes That Can Make a Real Difference . . . and the Data to Back Them Up

Marie K. Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

The long days spent caring for pets and their families in practice are challenging enough. Now, with the added pressure of staying connected to clients through postings on social media, communicating through text messaging, and monitoring online reviews, veterinary practice teams have a difficult time “unplugging.” With the added stress of balancing finances, family, and other demands, many of us are overextended to the point of collapse. Taking time to prioritize getting enough sleep, staying mindful, and practicing yoga and gratitude sounds farfetched. But investing small moments each day into self-care pays a team *and* their patients back in huge dividends.

Sleep hygiene refers to the “good habits” used to ensure falling (and staying) asleep for the suggested eight hours that most adults need to feel rested. Getting a proper night’s sleep leads to feelings of physical rejuvenation and has mental health benefits including memory consolidation, task integration, and emotional regulation.

✓ **How to get started:** *Improve sleep hygiene* by avoiding caffeine 6 hours before bedtime and setting an alarm for 30 minutes before bedtime to allow time to unwind, relax, and prepare for bed. Electronic devices including cell phones should be kept outside of the bedroom and not used within 1–2 hours of bedtime.

Mindfulness is discontinuing the nonstop juggling act and turning awareness to the present moment and a single task, whether it’s speaking with a client or simply breathing. When being mindful, attention is focused on the “here and now,” a practice that has many physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits. A mindfulness practice has been shown to alleviate anxiety and depression, boost immunity, and manage chronic pain.

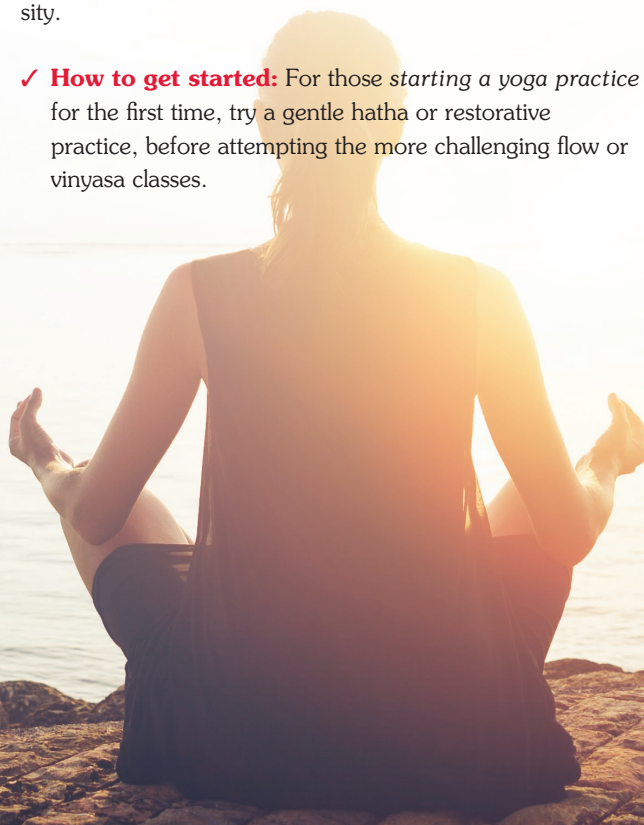


TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: While it might seem difficult, incorporating appropriate sleep hygiene as well as mindfulness, yoga, and gratitude practices into our busy schedules is possible. More importantly, these activities make measurable improvements in our physical and mental health.

✓ **How to get started:** *Practice mindfulness daily* by pausing and taking a deep breath before going into an appointment, turning off the music in the car and paying attention during a commute, and engaging in conversations with family and friends without checking one’s phone.

Yoga has many physical benefits, but the physiological, mental health, and emotional paybacks make it that much more worthwhile. A regular yoga practice helps balance metabolism, lower blood pressure, improve digestion, reduce stress, boost concentration, and cultivate calm in the face of adversity.

✓ **How to get started:** For those *starting a yoga practice* for the first time, try a gentle hatha or restorative practice, before attempting the more challenging flow or vinyasa classes.





Gratitude is arguably the most powerful emotion that overrides negative ones such as anger, frustration, sadness, or envy. When gratitude is truly embodied, people can overcome the uncomfortable thoughts that arise when they criticize themselves or their lives for not being “better.”

✓ **How to get started:** Studies show that a gratitude practice is most powerful when written, so *start a daily gratitude practice* by keeping a journal with updates that include a list of things that you are most grateful for each day.

While it might seem difficult, incorporating appropriate sleep hygiene, mindfulness, yoga, and gratitude practices into the busy schedules of veterinary team members is possible. More importantly, these activities make measurable improvements in our physical and mental health.

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Chapter 3.

How to Continue to Find Joy in Veterinary Practice

Kimberly Pope-Robinson, DVM, CCFP

We all remember the joy and excitement we felt when we got our acceptance letter to veterinary school or landed our first job in a veterinary hospital. But over time, the challenges of a busy and, at times, emotionally taxing daily practice life can start to diminish the joy. Because of these challenges, we can start blaming and judging ourselves and others inappropriately and unfairly. Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

- “I’m a failure,” “I should know the answer but I don’t,” “I don’t deserve to be here.”
- “These clients aren’t listening,” “My staff can’t do anything right,” “My boss is a horrible leader.”



These thoughts act like “Sinkers,” pulling us down until we feel like we’re drowning in fear, frustration, and sadness.

SO HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE “SINKERS”?

Recognize

It’s not difficult to recognize that Sinkers cause us to feel emotions like anger, shame, sadness, resentment, fear, or guilt. What is hard for veterinary caregivers is to recognize that it’s normal to feel the pull of the Sinkers when faced with the challenges of life and practice. We’re not broken for feeling that way.

Embrace

The goal is not to stop the Sinkers from pulling on us, because they always will to some degree. Instead, we need to



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: We all entered the veterinary profession because of the joy and satisfaction that providing care to our patients and pet owners brings us. Even if that joy has decreased or left us, we can recapture it!

embrace them by realizing what it is that pulls us down. Then we can offset their downward pull by filling our “Balloons.” Everyone has different Balloons that, when filled, allow us to float resiliently above our fear of failure. These Balloons can be any of the following:

- Mental—reading a book outside the veterinary field, becoming absorbed in a new hobby
- Physical—exercising, participating in a group sport, spending time outdoors
- Emotional—investing in counseling, rekindling an old relationship or starting a new one
- Spiritual—exploring a faith tradition, meditating, serving others

Intuitively, we know that when we care for ourselves, we are stronger, but as hardworking caregivers, we often need permission from ourselves to do so.

Connect

When we connect to these Sinkers, we can finally give ourselves permission to fill our Balloons . . . to take a break, smell the flowers, go for a walk, call a friend, or say a prayer. Our Sinkers and Balloons are unique to each of us. Creating permission to connect with them can also allow us to reconnect with people in our lives by sharing our vulnerability. Normalizing vulnerability tends to lead to acceptance of both Sinkers and Balloons. This connection can be a palpable healing force within a hospital.

The exact solution for an individual’s wellbeing is as unique as that person. But when we recognize our Sinkers and Balloons, embrace them as a valid part of who we are, and connect with ourselves and others by giving ourselves permission to fill our Balloons, we are on the path to regaining our joy for the profession.



HOW TO GET STARTED

- ✓ **Identify an activity that could fill each of your mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual Balloons.**
- ✓ **Identify several scenarios that act as Sinkers** for you and write them down. Share these Sinkers with a trusted person who can help you identify them as they're happening and encourage you to fill a Balloon to offset the pull of the Sinker.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a coach and speaker, **DR. KIMBERLY POPE-ROBINSON** leads veterinary teams on the path to stay connected with their life's passion through their career. She is the driving force behind the 1 Life Connected movement, which creates the space to give people permission to find their unique solution for wellbeing within the veterinary profession.

Chapter 4.

Compassion Fatigue and Burnout: Don't Let Them Win!

Rebecca Rose, AAS, CVT

We are all candidates for burnout and compassion fatigue. Fortunately, there are strategies we can use to head them off. But first, we must understand the causes, symptoms, and differences between these conditions.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout is related to the *environment* or the circumstances around your work. As an example, you may dread going to the practice because the team is inefficient, there is little accountability, you log too many overtime hours, or other appropriate systems are *not* in place to support a satisfactory work environment.

Signs of Burnout

- Exhaustion
- Negativity toward tasks
- Poor work attitude
- Difficulty concentrating

Combating burnout can best be addressed by *creating a healthy practice culture* and workplace environment.

Elements of a Healthy Culture That Can Help

Combat Burnout

- Establishing strong work and personal boundaries
- Incorporating best management practices
- Being properly staffed
- Instituting effective training programs
- Nurturing accountability



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: All veterinary team members can be affected by burnout and compassion fatigue to some extent. We must not ignore the importance of taking the necessary steps to help mitigate their effects on us.

WHAT IS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Compassion fatigue is related to the trauma experienced in the care we provide. Enduring day after day of dying patients; grieving or angry pet owners; and financial, diagnostic, or treatment constraints surrounding an animal's care wears on even the most seasoned caregivers in any part of the veterinary hospital.

Even in the most positive work environment or practice culture, compassion fatigue affects every team member to some extent, whether we recognize it or not.

Signs of Compassion Fatigue

- Lack of job satisfaction
- Avoidance of coworkers or clients
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Missing work, excessive use of sick days
- Intrusive imagery (reoccurring dreams of trauma or emotional scenes)

Combating compassion fatigue is best done by taking time to focus on ourselves.

Internally Focused Actions That Can Help

Combat Compassion Fatigue

- Establishing healthy work and personal boundaries
- Debriefing with the team after a traumatic experience
- Discussing the demands and effects of compassion fatigue openly
- Supporting self-care and healthy personal habits
- Regularly assessing our levels of stress and following stress reduction strategies



WHY IS BURNOUT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT THAN COMPASSION FATIGUE?

Because burnout is directed externally at the work environment, it's much easier to discuss, and it can become commonplace to complain to our coworkers, who will often validate our dissatisfaction. Clearly, this can lead to a negative workplace atmosphere and exacerbate a sinking culture.

In the case of compassion fatigue, we can perceive these feelings as a character flaw or a lack of commitment to the profession. Sharing them takes courage and trust in our coworkers. Realize that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

HOW DO OTHER CAREGIVING PROFESSIONS MANAGE BURNOUT AND COMPASSION FATIGUE?

In human medicine, where there is more research compiled on these topics, nurses, doctors, and medical organizations have taken a three-pronged approach to managing occupational stress:

1. Organizational responsibility to care for staff
2. A commitment among the staff to support each other
3. A personal responsibility for self-care

There is no reason veterinary hospitals can't do the same.



HOW TO GET STARTED

- ✓ Objectively assess your stress level by taking the "**Life Stress Test**" offered by the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (www.compassionfatigue.org).
- ✓ Work through the **Stressors and Relievers worksheet**. Identify your personal and work-related stressors and ways in which you enjoy relaxing and rejuvenating (<http://catalystvetpc.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Identify-relievers-stressors.pdf>).
- ✓ If you feel you have reached a state of burnout or compassion fatigue in which you are overwhelmed, thwarted with anxiety, using drugs to curb the pain, or considering hurting yourself or attempting suicide:
 1. **Seek help!** Find support within your veterinary hospital or beyond.
 2. Call, text, or online message the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-8255).
 3. Ask if your veterinary team has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and use it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REBECCA ROSE has spent her entire career within the veterinary community as a veterinary technician, practice manager, and industry consultant. She is an award-winning technician, author, and leader within the profession with a passion for helping veterinary teams thrive.

Chapter 5.

Integrating Concepts from Veterinary Social Work into Our Practices to Improve Workplace Wellbeing

Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW

In a recent study, 41% of veterinary students stated they had wanted to be a veterinarian “for as long as they can remember.”¹ This vocational commitment can be found almost universally in veterinary team members. People choose veterinary medicine because they care about animals and people. It is not surprising that difficult cases affect the hearts and minds of these dedicated professionals.

Veterinarians report distress about ethical conflicts in practice.^{2,3} Some clients blame and say hurtful things to veterinarians when their own financial resources are insufficient to save their pets.⁴ Highly bonded, anxious, lonely pet owners facing end-of-life decisions and euthanasia can cause veterinarians to worry about the safety and wellbeing of the owner. Sometimes veterinary teams have to face suspected animal abuse⁵ or concern for a colleague’s wellbeing and competence.

These situations involve varying degrees of emotions like anger, sadness, fear, and guilt for everyone involved. These situations cause *moral distress* and require *emotional labor* from the veterinary team.

MORAL DISTRESS: WHEN EXTERNAL FACTORS PREVENT TEAM MEMBERS FROM DOING WHAT THEY FEEL IS “RIGHT”⁶

Moral distress often arises when there is conflict among team members or with clients about end-of-life decisions, pet quality of life, and standard of care. Over time, repeated morally distressing situations and negative emotions cause compassion fatigue, which arises from the emotional labor these situations require.



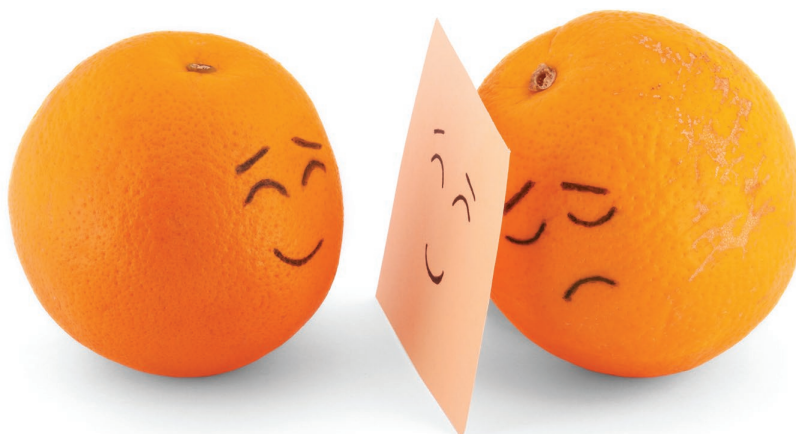
TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: All veterinary teams face moral distress (when external factors prevent them from doing what they feel is right), emotional labor (the process of managing and concealing emotional expressions), and team conflict. It is important to recognize and understand these challenges and develop skills to better address them.

EMOTIONAL LABOR: THE PROCESS OF MANAGING AND CONCEALING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS⁷

Emotional labor is a large part of practicing veterinary medicine successfully. Team members may need to express emotions publicly that do not match their private emotions, such as hiding their anger with a client’s inability to pay for treatment or concealing distressing emotions from their past to empathize with clients facing the euthanasia of a beloved pet. Emotional labor and moral distress can be exhausting, often creating “short fuses” and team conflict. Veterinary team conflict is expected and normal; however, when not managed well, it can impact morale⁸ and patient care.⁹

PROCESSES FOR MANAGING MORAL DISTRESS, EMOTIONAL LABOR, AND TEAM CONFLICT CAN OVERCOME OBSTACLES¹⁰

These processes allow a team to spend more time in the rewarding emotions of being veterinary medical professionals. These rewarding emotions include gratitude, happiness, confidence, and pride!





HOW TO GET STARTED

Steps your practice can take for helping with moral stress, emotional labor, and team conflict including the following:

- ✓ Hold a weekly one-hour “Moral DE-stress Meeting” to discuss the following questions in this order:
 1. What are the situations this week that made it hard to sleep or put aside thoughts of work when you were at home?
 2. What did you do well in that situation?
 3. What do you wish you had done differently?
 4. What did you learn?
 5. Is there anything you are grateful for in this situation, or just in general?
 6. Is there anything that was humorous about this situation or in this week that you remember?
- ✓ Provide yearly team training in communication skills and conflict resolution techniques.
- ✓ Establish relationships with mental health resources in your community and have a list of numbers available for clients and team members to help with difficult emotions that are beyond the scope of the veterinary team.

RESOURCES

American Animal Hospital Association

“AAHA Human Support in Veterinary Settings.”

https://www.aaha.org/public_documents/professional/resources/humansupport.pdf

RISHI: The Remen Institute Healer’s Art Course

<http://www.rishiprograms.org/programs/medical-educators-students>

Participate in a Healer’s Art group

The Schwartz Center

<http://www.theschwartzcenter.org>

Learn about Schwartz Center rounds to guide your practice’s approach to managing moral distress

Veterinary Communication for Professional Excellence

<http://csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/academics/clinsci/veterinary-communication>

970-297-5051

cvmb-clinsci@colostate.edu

Veterinary Social Work Program

www.vetsocialwork.utk.edu

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Chapter 6.

Bridging the Gap Between Personal and Cultural Workplace Wellbeing

Randy Hall

THE IMPORTANCE OF A POSITIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE

The culture in your practice significantly affects your life. Sometimes it's easy to pretend that we can separate the two or that we can just leave workplace stressors at work, but this is not the case. A growing body of both research and experience demonstrates that leading a healthy, happy life while being part of a stressful or toxic workplace culture is not a realistic expectation.¹

What can be done if the culture in the practice falls short of being positive, productive, engaging, and supportive? Veterinary team members should know that there are options short of starting the journey to find a new practice.

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION: ANYONE IN THE PRACTICE CAN ENGAGE TO BE A CATALYST FOR CULTURAL CHANGE!

One of the biggest stressors in any workplace is a *perceived lack of control*, which leads to feeling “trapped.” Once trapped, many will focus on either “misery” or “escape.” If escape is not imminent, misery remains and disengagement grows.

Being present every day as a positive and productive influence is a key component of feeling more in control and more fulfilled by the work you do. By taking this approach, you are



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: Our personal wellbeing is significantly impacted by our job satisfaction. Our job satisfaction is significantly impacted by our workplace culture. We can take thoughtful and specific steps to improve our overall wellbeing and make our workplace a healthy and happy place to fulfill our passion for helping pets.

leading by example. Leadership is about behavior more than it is about role or job title. This type of *engagement* is a key part of feeling more comfortable and gratified by your work.



HOW TO GET STARTED

These questions can be helpful in facilitating personal and practice team engagement:

- What do I want in a team member and how can I be that for others?
- What could others do to make the environment more positive for me and how can I do more of those things for others?
- What questions can I ask that might get us thinking as a team about how to improve our culture together?

Regardless of your position, consider having a discussion with your practice's leadership regarding the benefits of examining and improving your workplace culture. In the same way that your practice team is probably always looking for ways to improve the quality of medical services for your patients, every practice should also be looking for ways to improve the quality of the practice's workplace environment and culture.

STRIVE FOR HARMONY, NOT BALANCE, IN YOUR PERSONAL AND WORK LIFE

Some experts on culture have stopped using the word “balance” when describing personal and work life coexistence. Balance implies that work and leisure each take up 50% of a person's thoughts, time, energy, and effort. That is seldom, if ever, true in veterinary medicine. However, “harmony” can



be achieved between work life and personal life by taking steps that produce engagement, fulfillment, value, and connection in life outside of work.



HOW TO GET STARTED

- ✓ Explore a new activity or hobby.
- ✓ Begin volunteering.
- ✓ Read books unrelated to veterinary medicine.
- ✓ Find another sense of purpose that is not directly related to your work.
- ✓ Re-engage, initiate, or nurture relationships.

It's tempting to wait until "you find the time." The reality is, that isn't going to happen. Unless there is a firm commitment on taking first steps toward harmony, few will follow through. The goal is to create engaging meaning *outside* of work to limit feelings of being out of control or trapped in life overall. By **owning and thriving in your personal culture**, you can experience harmony with the culture *inside* of work, even if it has room for improvement.

Simply agreeing with these concepts academically will not create a cultural shift inside and outside of work. Neither will waiting until everyone in the practice is on board. Individual team members can make the commitment to themselves, begin engaging in work in a more solutions-oriented manner, and focus on flourishing outside of work.

RESOURCES

4th Gear Consulting

- Work-Life Balance Is a Myth; Plan for Work-Life Harmony Instead. <http://www.4thgearconsulting.com/blog/work-life-balance-myth-plan-work-life-harmony-instead/>
- Culture Change, It Could Happen. <http://www.4thgearconsulting.com/blog/culture-change-it-could-happen/>
- Culture Is Local. <http://www.4thgearconsulting.com/blog/culture-is-local/>

INC.com

- Snacks Aside, 4 Strategies for a Healthy Workplace. <https://www.inc.com/jeff-pruitt/snacks-aside-4-strategies-for-a-healthy-workplace.html>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RANDY HALL is a leadership trainer, executive coach, and CEO of 4th Gear Consulting. He works with veterinary hospitals and organizations of all sizes to help them effectively execute culture change, develop leaders, engage employees, and achieve greater success.





Chapter 7.

What Exactly Is “Workplace Culture,” and Why Is Everybody Talking About It?

Edward W. Kanara, DVM, DABVP

THE VALUE OF A HEALTHY CULTURE

You may have noticed more discussion recently regarding “workplace culture,” from continuing education programs at major veterinary conferences to the national media. So why is everybody talking about it? The answer is pretty simple: *a healthy, optimized culture, whether in a veterinary practice or a Fortune 500 company, is good for business and enhances employee satisfaction and morale.*

It’s no surprise that companies recognized as employers of choice and for their outstanding customer service place a high priority on ensuring they have a culture that fits their business and employee needs. For example, Ritz-Carlton Hotels and Disney have internal employee groups that focus entirely on shaping and monitoring their company culture. According to the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center, happy employees are 12% more productive, stay in their roles longer, and use fewer sick days. Ritz-Carlton even has an employee position entitled director of culture transformation.¹

There is also a correlation between personal wellbeing and workplace culture. Think about the anxiety you have felt



TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: Having a healthy practice culture is essential to providing the best patient care possible and optimizing employee job satisfaction and wellbeing. There are specific processes and tools that can help your team put together the puzzle pieces of a healthy culture.

when you were going to a workplace you dreaded instead of one you enjoyed. We all need to feel purpose in our job and want to feel heard and respected. High-performing teams are more engaged and productive.

Virtually every member of the practice team chose his or her career because of a genuine passion for helping pets. It’s extremely difficult for those team members to separate who they are from what they do, so when they are immersed in an unhealthy culture, their wellbeing is particularly at risk.

SO, WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY “WORKPLACE CULTURE”?

If you asked 10 different people (including experts) that question, you would likely receive 10 different answers. Often, we equate employee satisfaction or client-centric attitudes with culture. While these descriptors are important to a healthy culture, they are actually the *outcome* of a good culture. Culture has been described as the overall character and personality of an organization. It is exemplified by the sum of the values, traditions, behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of an organization or business. The Disney Institute suggests there are four interconnected processes that define organizational culture: employee selection, training, care, and communication.²

For me, the most concise and accurate definition is that ***culture is what results from the diligent adherence to established and expected workplace behaviors determined to be essential for achieving the organization’s goals, as well as the avoidance of those behaviors that are deemed unacceptable.*** For a culture to thrive, there must also be a reward system in place for expected behaviors, along with appropriate consequences and accountability for unacceptable behavior.

While experts may differ on the precise definition of culture, everyone seems to know when they work in a healthy culture and when they work in a toxic culture.

CAN YOU DESIGN AND SHAPE AN ORGANIZATION’S CULTURE OR DOES IT JUST HAPPEN?

Yes and yes . . . if an organization does not take the time and effort to determine its culture, a “rogue” culture will emerge whether we recognize it as such or not. Often, when we just let culture *happen*, it’s characterized by ambiguity, lack of consistency of job expectations, and frustration over what may be perceived as a lack of leadership from practice owners or managers.

The good news is there is a pathway of well-established processes that can be followed to assess the current practice culture, design and shape a practice’s aspirational culture, and then execute the specific steps necessary to implement a customized, optimal, healthy culture.

WHO’S RESPONSIBLE FOR DEVELOPING A HEALTHY PRACTICE CULTURE?

Since every business or organization already has an established culture, we are really talking about culture transformation. This may run the gamut from taking a toxic culture to a healthy one or incrementally improving an already good culture to make it a great one. Ultimately, the responsibility for driving culture transformation is that of the practice’s leadership team.

This starts as a top-down effort because practice leadership must see the value, have an appreciation for the effort required, and enthusiastically champion what’s in it for the entire practice team as well as what’s in it for patients and pet owners. But most importantly, accurately assessing the current culture and implementing an improved one requires that every stakeholder have a significant voice in helping shape the new culture. Without genuine buy-in from the entire team, successful culture transformation will not happen.



HOW CAN I GET STARTED TRANSFORMING MY PRACTICE’S CULTURE AND TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL?

You could start with something as simple as asking to put this topic on the next practice staff meeting agenda and having a team discussion regarding the potential value for transforming your practice’s culture. You might have every member of the practice team read this AAHA’s *Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing* and discuss the self-care activities and the correlation between personal wellbeing and workplace culture. Additionally, explore the AAHA website for more information on helping transform your culture. Your patients and clients will thank you!

RESOURCES

- Coffman, Curt, and Kathie Sorensen.** *Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch.* Denver: Liang Addison Press, 2013.
- Connors, Roger, and Tom Smith.** *Change the Culture, Change the Game.* New York: Portfolio, 2012.
- Schein, Edgar H.** *Organizational Culture & Leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

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1. Layden L. Ritz-Carlton Shares Excellence Tips. *Naples Daily News*; October 14, 2016.
2. Disney Institute. Employee Engagement. <https://disneyinstitute.com/about/our-core-competencies/culture>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR. EDWARD W. KANARA has been a veterinary practice owner, has held various senior executive positions at Pfizer Animal Health, and currently is the managing member of the Kanara Consulting Group, LLC. He has a special interest and expertise in organizational culture transformation and has led or overseen culture change efforts in both small and large organizations, including a culture transformation initiative for a NCAA Division I athletic team. The principles and processes for culture change transcend the industry or organization involved. He is also a certified executive coach.



Final Thoughts Finding Refuge at Work

Dear Colleagues,

By now, I hope you're as excited as I am about the AAHA Board of Directors' vision for empowering veterinary practice team members to proactively take control of their self-care and embrace workplace cultural transformation. Seeking inspiration from Gandhi, I firmly believe that "a hospital's culture resides in the heart and soul of its people."

The next steps along this journey will require work, both from you as an individual and from your team as a group. Begin by reviewing the action steps in the previous chapters and pick a handful that resonate with you. Stay tuned for the exciting resources that AAHA will be releasing over time. Ultimately, we intend to provide tools to help practices develop cultures that are so good, employees can find refuge at work from their complicated lives.

Such a refuge is fervently protected at my own hospital. Team members' knowledge that they are safe, valued, and respected provides them with certainty at work despite the many challenges we all face outside of work. I've seen tangible benefits to the business, including decreased staff turnover and an easier time attracting new staff because of our reputation for cultivating this positive culture. I've also found it easier to implement change and "best practices" when the staff is empowered to care for themselves and for the team.

Under Dr. Cavanaugh's leadership, I've also seen changes in AAHA's headquarters, where they are "walking the walk" and are challenging the staff to take accountability for wellness

in their own lives. The results have been very encouraging. The staff have enjoyed regular yoga sessions, mindfulness breaks, wellness walks with office dogs, group team-building activities, and other events that have placed self-care at the forefront of their minds. The employee review process has been restructured to put more focus on behaviors and attitudes that promote a positive culture, not just on productivity. This cultural shift positions AAHA to provide an exceptional member experience.

I believe that once your team is on board with creating a workplace where they can thrive, you will soon recognize positive change in your hospital. It won't be long until you can look back on what you've accomplished as a group and realize how much healthier and happier you are. I encourage you to invest in yourself and your practice team, and reap the benefits of a cultural transformation.

Sincerely,

Mark McConnell, BVMS, MRCVS
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The Standard of
Veterinary Excellence

Established in 1933 by leaders in the veterinary profession, AAHA is best known for its accreditation of companion animal veterinary practices. To become accredited, companion animal hospitals undergo regular comprehensive evaluations by AAHA veterinary experts who evaluate the practice on approximately 900 standards of veterinary care. AAHA also develops publications and educational programs and resources designed to help companion animal hospitals thrive. Today, more than 3,700 practice teams (15% of all veterinary practices in the United States and Canada) are AAHA accredited. For more information about AAHA, visit aaha.org.

