Thanksgiving from the Musings of a General Practice Veterinarian

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I sit here in front of the computer with a cat in my lap, another circling to find a spot, a large mug of hot tea, and a warm sofa. By rights, there should be a warm crackling fire to round this out, but you can’t have everything.

These sorts of surroundings at this time of year can make some of us think back to past seasons, earlier episodes in our careers, and things that make us happy about this profession and life. This exercise is officially supposed to be a mindfulness strategy to help combat burnout and negative mental circling, though it is hard to be official around a determined cat.

What factor can trigger thankfulness?

Long-term clients and many generations of their pets. It is so nice to have the luxury of stability, of caring for the same families for many years, sometimes even from parents to children. Initially, it bothered me when I first had to euthanize a patient that I had seen since a puppy for an age-related severe illness. After all, who thinks about the other end of the life cycle when discussing puppy care and socialization? And then to bring in the next puppy generation to the same doctor for care? But then the realization dawned that this family trusted us so much with the first one and recognized our caring so much during the other end of life that they wanted the same level of care for the next one(s). Pressure? Or just the ultimate compliment? Regardless, if I end up knowing the names of children and grand-dogs and can recite the names of multiple previous pets, I belong in this group.

Very nice clients who made a point, even outside the pandemic, of expressing their thanks to us for what we have done for them and their animals. Sometimes, this takes the form of cards, which can be read and then put into an Appreciation File to be reread when we are feeling low. Sometimes, it is when they thank all the team members after a visit – not just the doctor, but also the techs and front desk /CSRs. These colleagues don’t get thanked nearly often enough! And sometimes, it is just small, thoughtful gifts to brighten our day. One lady brings a cup of fresh hot coffee, and another gentleman brings fancy doughnuts from the local farmers’ market. One family makes a point of saying nice things online about how happy they are with how they are treated. Some of these owners and pets just make us smile when we simply see them on the schedule.

Clients who notice changes early and get them checked out early enough that we can intervene and manage significant health issues long term. It is so appreciated when people are observant enough to recognize issues, especially when they let us figure out what is going on and listen when we discuss the different ways we could approach management. There is rarely only one way to deal with a problem (unless you are in an emergency situation), and client and pet needs vary all over the map. Creativity is required for some of these. I particularly appreciate the detail-oriented people who put in the time to monitor the itching, breathing, etc. signs to help determine what approaches worked better than others.

Caring colleagues who also act as supporters. It isn’t just clients who can help remind us why we got into this field or that there is life outside the hospital walls. I am particularly grateful for those who can turn around a negative day or week with a well-timed corny joke, silly pet/child photos, or stories of what their latest foster kitten just did. These people have amazing timing and perception to realize when a little pick-me-up is needed. A well-timed Dad Joke is a potent force.

Family and friends outside the hospital walls. They serve to remind us that there is a whole world out there, and we don’t need to allow ourselves to be defined by our activities at work and the perceptions of people at work. There are paths to be hiked, plants to be admired/photographed, gardens to be tended, and games to be watched. And there is nothing wrong with just “BEING” quietly together with people or our own pets while we recharge our batteries.

Just thinking about things like these reminds me why we still do this. And now it is time for a new cup of tea and to go feed those cats.