Veterinarians and Mental Health: CDC Results and Resources

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The recent suicides of Dr. Shirley Koshi and Dr. Sophia Yin brought national attention to the issues of depression, mental health and suicide, which have been an increasingly discussed situation within our profession.

Every 40 seconds a person dies by suicide somewhere in the world. Over 800,000 people die due to suicide every year, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds. (See the World Health Organization’s report, Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative, for these facts and more.)

How does the veterinary profession compare to the U.S. population regarding depression, mental illness, and suicide? The results of a recent survey performed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and a number of health agencies don’t paint a rosy picture.

These results are based on more than ten thousand practicing veterinarians who responded to the survey, most (69%) of whom are in small animal practice. According to the survey:

- 6.8% of males and 10.9% of females in the profession have serious mental illness/psychiatric disorder, feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness since graduation from veterinary school. Compared to 3.5% and 4.4% lifetime average in the U.S., males in the veterinary profession have twice the prevalence and females in the profession have two to three times the prevalence compared to the national average.
- 24.5% of males and 36.7% of females in veterinary medicine have experienced depressive episodes since leaving veterinary school, which is about one-and-a-half times the prevalence of a U.S. adult throughout their lifetime.
- 14.4% of males and 19.1% of females in the veterinary profession have considered suicide since leaving veterinary school. This is three times the U.S. national average.
- 1.1% of males and 1.4% of females in the veterinary profession have attempted suicide since leaving veterinary school. This is below the national average for suicide attempts, and the authors suggest that it may be due to veterinarians’ ready access to drugs that may be used to commit suicide and that they are more likely to be successful in their suicide attempts, so there are fewer survivors to respond to the survey.
- The three primary stressors identified by the respondents were the demands of veterinary practice; veterinary practice management responsibilities; and professional mistakes and client complaints.

There is a stigma among our profession toward those with mental illness, as though mental illness is a weakness that should be stifled, overcome or simply cut out like a surgeon excising a growth. But it’s not that simple. Mental illness is not a weakness or a personal or professional failing; it’s a real medical condition that must be treated.

If you think your mental or emotional health is falling by the wayside and in need of some help, you’re not alone and there are people who can help you. Please get help. Do you recognize potential signs in a friend or colleague? Support them, but also get help from experienced mental health professionals. See the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention website for more information. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline website also provides a number of useful resources, including a Suicide Prevention Lifeline Safety Plan. The University of Tennessee’s Veterinary Social Work program is another great resource. Feel free to share others in the comments below. There’s also a great series of TED talks on mental health, available online.

Our Peer Assistance and Wellness resources provide valuable information, as do several of our Simple Answers to Tough Questions videos. The members of the 2014-2015 AVMA Future Leaders program recognized the need to develop focused resources to help veterinarians, and those resources are in development now and are anticipated to be available before or during the AVMA Convention in Boston. Speaking of the convention, there will be several presentations on emotional and mental wellness, including a half-day symposium facilitated by the Future Leaders on the morning of Sunday, July 12.

1 (800) 273-8255
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Hours: 24 hours, 7 days a week
Languages: English, Spanish
Website: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

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