

Diagnosing Veterinary Wellbeing

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere you look in vet med these days, there is another article talking about compassion fatigue and wellbeing problems in our profession. In this lecture, we'll examine some of the literature behind these new articles, and also talk about actionable solutions.

WHO WE ARE

There are few better studies of who veterinarians are as people before we enter our workplaces than vet students. In a 2005 study, Zenner gave a barrage of psychologic screening test in an incoming freshman class at WSU vet school and then compared those results to other high achievers. He found comparatively vet students are hypercompetitive, they are perfectionist with a tremendous fear of failure, they have elevated levels of anxiety, and a tendency for depressive episodes.

Competitiveness

Competitiveness can be a tool that drives you to succeed, or it can be the trait that makes you miserable when you don't live up to your own unrealistic expectations. One method for dealing with unhealthy competitiveness is to reconfigure your goals to focus on the things you can control. Many people, especially those who are competitive, set goals in relation to how other people perform. This is called an extrinsic goal. However, this form of goal leaves the success or failure of our goal partially in the hands of other people. It's more effective to tailor your goal to something that is within your control. Let's take the goal of having good grades for an example. An extrinsic version of this goal would be to be the best student in your vet school class. However, you cannot control the intelligence level of others, nor how much they study. Therefore, a significant portion of the success or failure of this goal lies in factors you cannot control. A better goal would be to set study targets for yourself.

Anxiety

Elevated anxiety is something we see frequent on Not One More Vet, and also has been recognized as a common problem by Zenner, as well as the recent Merck Wellbeing study.

So, anxiety is often multifactorial, and no one solution will work for everyone. Some people deal with it through mindfulness, which is covered in my *Smart Feelings: Training your EQ* lecture. Some people need medication and therapy. Interestingly, exercise has been shown in multiple studies to have a positive effect here. The exercises can be aerobic or anaerobic- generally moderate to vigorous exercise is recommended, and it's been shown to reduce symptoms of PD, SA, GAD, OCD and PTSD. It helps on its own and can improve results of more traditional therapies as well.

It also improves positive affect, decreases negative affect basically you feel and act happier after you exercise. The effect is immediate and last for up to 4 hours.

The amount of exercise researched varies quite a bit from study to study, but Current WHO recommendation is 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise.

Fear of Failure

Zenner found vet students are perfectionist with a fear of failure, and unfortunately, we show decreased resiliency in the face of failure. I've detailed a more comprehensive strategy in building resiliency in my lecture *Bounce Forward: Learning from Failure*, but a simple trick accessible to everyone when you fail is to contextualize the mistake. If you miss a diagnosis, investigate your last 100 cases. How many did you do well on, and how many did you miss? We find that people do this exercise, they find they have a very high success rate overall and it helps put their failure in perspective.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome is an experience first described by two psychologists in the 70s. They described that in groups of high achievers it is a common experience to feel one is a fraud, and that they have only achieved their accomplishments by luck/timing/etc. Literature suggests that up to 70% of all people

experience this phenomenon at some point. It's so common- so pervasive, that we are unlikely to ever defeat it- however we can absolutely address it. It doesn't have to be crippling. And the way we address it is by talking about it. First, we explain to all of these high achievers that this phenomenon is known and common so they can hopefully recognize it when it is happening in themselves. When we are experiencing it in ourselves we need to talk about it. Reach out to colleagues and mentors and have them set you straight. Things are rarely as bad as your inner monologue wants you to believe.

Tendency for Depressive Episodes

Zenner is not the only author to note a propensity for mental illness in the veterinary profession. Nett et al is a rather large scale survey of veterinarians on VIN with just over 11,000 responses. They found that compared to the general public we have increased rates of serious psychologic distress, we are more likely to experience depressive episodes and we are more likely to express suicidal ideation. This study found 1 in 6 veterinarians contemplates suicide in their careers.

Interestingly the new Merck Wellbeing Study did not find that veterinarians were experiencing on average more serious psychologic distress than the general public. However, when you break out the younger veterinarians those under the age of 44 are still experiencing about double the rates of serious psychologic distress than the general public. They defined that veterinarians, especially younger veterinarians, are experiencing wellbeing problems. Additionally, they found that shockingly few veterinarians under the age of 34, just 24%, would recommend this profession to a loved one.

Regardless of whether we choose to look at this through the lens of a wellbeing problem or a psychologic distress problem, I think it's important to recognize that half of veterinarians in significant distress do not seek mental health care. We need to work together as a community to decrease the stigma of receiving mental health care. Another issue with veterinarians appears to be access to care. Veterinarians work long hours, and it can be difficult to get to the doctor. There are several online therapy services including betterhelp.com and talkspace.com that can provide contact with mental health professionals on a more flexible schedule.

WHERE WE WORK

Who we are is far from the whole story. Veterinarians today face some common stressors. Many veterinarians regularly face serious ethical and moral dilemmas in their workplace. Dr. Barry Kipperman's work shows that 52% of veterinarians face ethical dilemmas on a weekly basis. The impact of financial matters, both our personal finances, in regards to things like student debt, and the economic restrictions placed on us by our clients, cause tremendous stress in our professional environments.

Many veterinarians are suffering from chronic work overload. I did an informal poll that showed that 77% do not regularly eat lunch during their work days; days that are often more than 10 hours long. 34% of veterinarians polled routinely take less than a week of vacation a year, including major holidays. These informal polls bely the reality that many veterinarians are simply not taking care of themselves, and we cannot be effective caregivers if we are chronically under cared for ourselves.

The stressors don't end there. We regularly deal with conflict in our workplaces, both with our clients and with our coworkers. Our expanding online world is only compounding this problem. In fact, the AVMA reports one in five veterinarians have experienced cyberbullying. These attacks can be so demoralizing that 48% of veterinarians who experience them seriously consider a career change.

I would suggest that focusing on soft skills education, such as conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, ethics training would help strengthen our community and help us deal with some of these stressors. Additionally, fostering mentorship and social networks can help build resiliency and encourage appropriate boundary setting.

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