

The Power of Failure

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INTRODUCTION

Resiliency is defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficult circumstances. It is a measure of toughness, and of ability to learn and grow from mistakes made. It is your capacity to deal with failure.

The most successful people in the world have failed dramatically in their lives. In fact, many of those same people tell us they are as successful as they are because they learned to fail faster, and bounce forward. Winston Churchill in fact said “Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm.”

Unfortunately, studies have shown that as a breed, veterinarians have poor resiliency. So how do we cultivate this trait in our profession?

STATE OF AFFAIRS

There are several studies that illustrate our lack of resiliency as a profession. In one of these, Zenner et al, an incoming class of vet school students was given psychologic scoring screens and then those results were compared against other high achievers, specifically high achieving high school students and professional athlete. They found that overall veterinary students have elevated levels of anxiety, we have a tendency for depressive episodes, we are hyper competitive, and we have a tremendous fear of failure. Unfortunately, they also found we had a decreased capacity to deal with failure when it occurs.

In Bartram et al, working veterinarians in the UK were polled as to their most significant stressors, and unexpected clinical outcomes and possibility of client complaints and litigation were listed as some of the most significant concerns. At the root of both of these concerns lies a tremendous fear of failure.

Finally, Kogan et al polled veterinarians on VIN, and asked about “Near Misses” and “Adverse Events” in the last calendar year. 64.2% of veterinarians had a near miss, and 29.5% had an adverse event in the last calendar year. So, it’s fair to say that we’re all human and we make mistakes. Focusing on the NM, we see that 33% of these NM had no potential for serious harm to a patient. And remember, that regardless of the potential impact, these are near misses. There was no actual negative consequence to a patient. However, these near misses still affected these veterinarians. The percentage of veterinarians and the level of impact on the personal and professional lives of these veterinarians is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Impact of Near Misses on Veterinarians

	Extremely Negative	Moderately Negative	Minimally Negative	No Impact
Personal Impact- Short term	11%	24.60%	26.60%	38%
Personal Impact- Long term	5%	17.50%	27.40%	49.70%
Professional Impact- Short term	9.80%	28%	28.50%	33.50%
Professional Impact- Long term	1%	12%	19.80%	66.90%

As we dive even deeper in to the data on near misses, we see that 37.6% of veterinarians lost confidence in their ability as a doctor due to this near miss, and 17.7% of them began to question their career choice. These doctors are considering a career change because of a mistake that led to absolutely no consequences! If a trivial mistake has made you consider a new career path after 8 years or more of higher education, you need to work on your resilience. Good news-resiliency can be taught!

TRAINING RESILIENCY

The good news is that skills critical to resiliency can be taught. In a study of 32 doctors, those given Stress Management and Resilience Training improved on the Connor Davis Resilience Scale, The Perceived Stress, the Smith Anxiety Scale and Overall quality of life measures compared with controls.

When coping strategies are examined, they are broadly broken in two categories: problem focused and emotional focused coping strategies. Problem focused coping directly tackles the cause of stress with the aim to reduce or remove the cause. Emotional focused coping tries to reduce negative emotional responses associated with stress. Unsurprisingly, problem focused coping strategies are more effective overall. However, they aren't always available for every stressor. For instance, if your stress is the death of a loved one, you cannot fix the underlying cause of stress. Therefore, emotional coping strategies are important to cultivate despite being less effective.

Optimism and Gratitude

It has been shown that people who are have an optimistic disposition tend to utilize problem focused coping strategies more often. Basically, if you have a more positive outlook, you seem more able to look at your problems critically.

The problem is that in general, humans are evolutionarily wired to focus on the negative. It's called negativity bias. You are in fact 3x more likely to remember the negative than the positive. However, there are some exercises you can use to fight this bias. They have been shown in numerous studies to increase happiness and optimism, which should in turn increase your capacity to use problem focused coping strategies.

One of these exercises is called the "Three Good Things" exercise, also commonly referred to as a gratitude exercise. In this exercise, you think of three specific and timely good things that have happened to you recently. They need not be big things, something as simple as having a good sandwich for lunch counts! The more specific they are, and the more details you can include about why it was good, the more effective the exercise. Similar exercises have been shown to be helpful in the healthcare setting. In one study, 102 practitioners in a human hospital system were randomized to three groups. One group wrote a gratitude diary twice a week, one a diary about things that had hassled them at work, and then the final group kept no diary. A general decline was seen in both stress and depressive symptoms in the gratitude diary compared with both controls.

Problem Based Coping Strategies

Some key problem based coping strategies include causal analysis, instrumental social support, systems implementation.

Causal Analysis

Causal analysis is the ability to think critically about your problems. People who score highly on this are able to examine their problems from multiple angles to find solutions.

If you are not naturally gifted at causal analysis, there are some strategies that can help you examine your stressors. Really the goal of these exercises is to add some ordered thinking to your problem solving. Some may need to use some emotional based coping mechanisms, like mindfulness, in order to achieve the right head space to utilize these strategies. This just goes to show that both emotional focused and problem focused coping strategies are worth cultivating.

For instance, for any given stressor start by writing down the answers to three questions:

1. What happened? Try to be objective here. Think about facts.
2. Why did it happen? Some recommend that you actually ask why three to five times to get to the root issue.
3. What can be done to decrease the likelihood of it happening again? Rank solutions in order of easiest to most difficult to implement, as well as chance of success.

Instrumental Social Support

Not all forms of social support are equal when it comes to resolving stressors. The most effective form of social support is to seek out advice from people who have been in similar situations, and can offer you concrete solutions. So, while telling your spouse about your bad surgical complication is fine, discussing it with a more experienced surgeon can lead you to more concrete information to deal with your stressors.

Systems Implementation

Once you've thought through your problem and sought good advice, the next step is to spring in to action. Implementing systems and solutions is the final step in coping. I would highly recommend using a goal based strategy, such as the SMART goal system to achieve this. In the SMART goal system, you set Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time bound goals. After you've fully defined the parameters of your goal, you set action steps with deadlines. This process leads you to habit forming, which is an effective way to achieve your goal.

Emotional Based Coping Strategies

I broadly break up the emotional based coping strategies in to physical coping strategies and psychologic coping strategies. Not all coping strategies are created equal, and in fact, some are shown to have long term negative consequences for both psychologic and physical health. It behooves you to choose your coping strategies carefully.

Physical Emotional Based Coping Strategies

Physical emotional based coping strategies can encompass some positive coping strategies, such as self-care, and exercise. They can also include some strategies that can be less adaptive, such as alcohol and drug use.

One strategy I use to check on my self-care is to ask myself 5 questions when I'm feeling stressed:

1. Have I eaten in the last 2 hours?
2. Have I drunk water in the last hour?
3. Have I stood up and walked 100 steps in the last hour?
4. Have I showered in the last 24 hours?
5. Have I slept at least 6 hours in the last 24 hours?

The importance of exercise bears mentioning. I'm sure if you polled adults, the vast majority of us are aware that we should exercise, but did you know that only 30% of American adults get the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity a week. Exercise has far more than physical health benefits. Exercise has been shown in multiple studies to have a positive effect on psychologic health. The exercises can be aerobic or anaerobic- generally moderate to vigorous exercise is recommended, and it's been shown to reduce symptoms of panic disorder, social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and PTSD. It helps on its own and can improve results of more traditional therapies as well.

One strategy that seems very common among veterinarians is the use of alcohol. Unfortunately, in one study, Bartram et al, 63% of UK vets surveyed were classified as at risk drinkers. One in four men and one in eight women who drink consumed >5 units of alcohol on a typical day when drinking. Binge drinking (>6 units on a single occasion) occurred at least weekly for 25% of men and 12% of women.

Harling et al, in their study of 1060 veterinarians found 31% were at risk drinkers and 13% were positive for problem drinking. They also found that high-risk alcohol consumption was found more often in practice owners than in veterinarians employed in a practice or working elsewhere. 21.9% of the veterinarians reported binge drinking on at least one occasion during the previous 30 days. 6.9% reported regular binge drinking at least once a week.

Harling et al also looked at drug use, specifically drug use of tranquilizers or sedatives, appetite suppressants or stimulants, analgesics and neuroleptics. They found that 57.4% of the veterinarians had taken a drug from one groups within the preceding 30 days. 5.0% of the drugs had been medically prescribed by a doctor. About one in five (19.8%) used one of the drugs regularly, i.e. at least once a week. They found that statistically women and associate veterinarians were more likely to use drugs.

Psychologic Emotional Based Coping Strategies

Psychologic emotional based coping strategies include strategies such as psychotherapy, emotional intelligence skills, mindfulness, contextualization and self-compassion.

Two aspects of psychotherapy shown to be particularly helpful in coping include emotional disclosure and cognitive reappraisal. Broadly, Emotional disclosure is the act of talking or writing about stressful events. Cognitive Reappraisal is re-examining stressful events by considering other perspectives. In Slavin-Spenny et al people were randomized to several groups: one talked to a tape recorder, another wrote expressively, another spoke to a passive listener, another spoke to a therapist, and finally a group wrote or spoke about a neutral topic. Interestingly, any of the disclosure groups had significant improvements on their post traumatic growth scores. Similarly, In Lumley et al, students with flagging GPAs were placed in a writing exercise, either about stressful experiences or a control topic (time management). Those who wrote about stressful symptoms, were happier overall, and had better GPAs.

So these therapeutic exercises can work. Unfortunately, the recent Merck mental wellbeing study found that only 50% of veterinarians in serious psychologic distress seek mental health care.

Emotional intelligence and mindfulness will be covered in depth in my other lecture on that topic.

Contextualization is a skill that we commonly utilize in Not One More Vet, the online support group that I help lead. Let's say a significant surgical error occurs during a spay. We ask that doctor to think of how many spays they've done correctly without incident. Often the number is in the hundreds, if not higher. When we contextualize, we see that this doctor has a 99% or higher success rate. Remember, your brain is wired to remember the negative.

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