

Healthy people, healthy practice: Tools to enhance health and wellbeing

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Abstract

Veterinary professionals are highly committed and dedicated individuals who work hard to care for their patients, clients, colleagues, and communities. For those who devote their lives to the service of others, the physical, emotional, and spiritual demands can lead to exhaustion. Day-to-day work expectations and pressures can at times feel overwhelming and isolating, and have detrimental effects on personal and professional wellbeing. The natural response may be to work harder, to give more, until there is nothing left to give. The good news is that as caring individuals, you have the capacity to focus that care on yourself. With development of healthy practices, you can continue to effectively provide comprehensive and compassionate care for others, while taking care of yourself. This paper will address and define some of the main challenges to health and wellbeing and identify strategies and tools individuals can implement to address them.

Key words: compassion fatigue, burnout, wellbeing

Introduction

In a 2015 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) survey of veterinarians of 11,627 respondents, 1,077 (9%) of respondents were experiencing current serious psychological distress. Since leaving veterinary school, 3,655 (31%) respondents experienced depressive episodes, 1,952 (17%) experienced suicidal ideation, and 157 (1%) attempted suicide. Some 2,228 (19%) respondents were receiving treatment for a mental health condition. Only 3,250 of 10,220 (32%) respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that people are sympathetic toward persons with mental illness. The most reported practice-related stressor was demands of practice.⁴ Results of a 2018 Merck study found of the 3,540 responses, 66% of respondents, including 79% of associate veterinarians in practice, reported experiencing feelings of depression, compassion fatigue or burnout, or anxiety or panic attacks within the past year. Overall, 5.3% of veterinarians experienced serious psychological distress within the past 30 days and 25% of respondents had thought about suicide at some time in their lives. Only 41% of veterinarians who responded to the survey indicated that they would recommend the profession to a friend or family member. Major reasons for not recommending the profession were related to compensation, high student debt, and the personal toll practicing veterinary medicine takes on an individual.⁵

In May of 2019, the World Health Organization added burn-out to the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon and defined it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” It is characterized by 3 dimensions: “1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and 3) reduced professional efficacy. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”⁶

Common Challenges

Factors challenging the health and wellbeing of veterinary professionals are complex and interwoven. Compassion fatigue is a state experienced when one is feeling the impact of burnout, defined above, and secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is when exposure to others pain and suffering creates a sense that the trauma has happened to you. The combination of these factors leads to a reduced capacity for engagement as a consequence of exhaustion from being with suffering.² Moral distress refers to feelings provoked by the real or perceived violation of one’s moral or ethical beliefs and can include issues of fairness, respect, commitment to care. Decision fatigue is “a psychological phenomenon surrounding a person’s ability or capacity to make decisions.” When one experiences decision fatigue, the ability to make decisions can get worse as the brain will be more fatigued. This fatigue applies to all decisions, not simply the large or more difficult ones.³

Most strategies and tools for intervention exist at the individual and working group level. It is important to note that burn-out, as a phenomenon directly related to the workplace, must be acknowledged and dealt with by organizations and institutions as they have a primary role in creating the situational factors inherent in it.

Strategies Supporting Wellbeing

Veterinary professionals, caring, compassionate and dedicated to service, can experience any or all the challenges listed above at some point in their working life. Identifying and naming one’s challenges can help in finding ways to deal with or overcome them. Using a whole person model including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual ele-

ments helps focus on areas that are working well and areas of concern.

Once specific challenges have been identified and named, common strategies for individuals include development of coping skills, cognitive restructuring, setting boundaries, conflict and time management. Assess the potential to change work patterns, work less, taking more breaks, job sharing, and avoiding overtime work. In addition, building a strong community of support both at work and outside have been found to support wellbeing. Finally, utilizing relaxation techniques, promoting good health, eating, fitness, and sleep provide a strong foundation of health, wellbeing, and self-care which can be helpful when faced with the challenges of work.

Engagement has been identified as the positive counterpart to the challenges described above. Engagement with the meaning and purpose of your work, connection to the calling which brought you to veterinary medicine, involvement with colleagues, clients and patients, giving back to the community and a sense of efficacy and connection to the deeper value in the work you do sets a foundation of protection when facing professional challenges. Fostering compassion satisfaction and self-compassion helps one focus on the positive aspects of working as a helper caring for others and oneself. Compassion makes us feel good and compassionate action activates pleasure circuits in the brain. In a 2015 article on sources of satisfaction in veterinary professionals, Martin Cake and colleagues found 7 elements contributed to a life of meaning: helping and healing animals, grateful clients, interesting and varied challenging job, lifelong learning, educating others, and financial rewards.¹

Conclusion

To practice effective and beneficial veterinary medicine, one must learn specific clinical skills and techniques and have the education, knowledge, and experience to implement

them. The process of practice includes assessment, diagnosing, treatment planning and implementation, evaluation, and possibly modification or additions to what was done. It is the same for our professional and personal health and wellbeing. Developing awareness of what we are experiencing, naming it, assessing the various elements involved, creating strategies and techniques to address and overcome challenges, and taking action. These steps, followed by evaluation and adjustments as necessary, can support us in being whole, healthy human beings with the expertise, clinical skills, knowledge, and ability to be competent and caring veterinary practitioners while maintaining our personal and professional health and wellbeing.

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