

Coping with the stress of practice

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Abstract

Veterinary practice is stressful and always will be. Stress is a natural animal adaptation that allows us to face challenges and survive. The thinking human brain gives us the unique opportunity to convert a physiologic mechanism meant to protect us into a chronic condition that causes us bodily harm. How then do we create coping strategies to stop our propensity for chronic, maladaptive stress? While there is excellent data that proper diet, exercise and sleep habits help, bovine veterinarians may be limited in their ability to employ these tools. Practicing techniques like meditation, gratitude, self-compassion, and story-checking, all of which can be done in the truck between calls, can wake us up to our habits of thought and change the volume and channel on the chatter in our brains. Waking up to our thoughts is the first step to changing how we relate to stress as it arises in the moment and being more resilient in our ability to cope with it.

Key words: stress, meditation, self-compassion

Introduction

As veterinarians, we are trained to evaluate presentations of disease, synthesize the data we collect with physical examinations and diagnostic tests, prepare a differential diagnosis list and treatment strategy and monitor for outcome. Four years of veterinary education, countless hours in practice and our propensity for Type A personalities, teaches us the following mantra: “See the problem and fix it”. We are good at this, except when it comes to our mental health and wellbeing. Bovine veterinarians in particular, I would argue, suffer from a “tough guy” mentality. Our identity in some respects revolves around our ability to work a physically difficult job, in trying weather, and at all hours of the day. We tell ourselves, “This job is hard, it’s supposed to be hard, our clients work hard and so should we.” The mythology of the tough guy says that the signs of chronic stress and burn out – including sleep abnormalities, diet indiscretion, and irritability – are a normal part of the job and the treatment is to “suck it up”. For some, this strategy could be successful. For me, it led to a humiliating moment in the emergency room when, what I thought was a stroke, turned out to be a full-blown panic attack.

The Second Arrow

Stress is a normal animal adaptation that protects us from threats to our safety. When the gazelle on the plains

senses the presence of the lion, her sympathetic nervous system activates to move her body effectively to safety. We, as veterinarians, know the exact physiologic mechanisms by which this occurs. However, once that gazelle is safe again, her sympathetic response shuts down and she returns to her peaceful existence grazing on the plain. She does not stand around worrying about the next lion attack, wondering if she has protected her offspring well enough, or doubting whether she will be fast enough to get away the next time.⁵ Those responses to stress are uniquely human, for better or worse. Our brains often respond to stress by catastrophizing the next stressful event, doubting our abilities to respond, and using our inner cattle prods to condemn our response and “motivate” us to be better next time.

Buddhists call this phenomenon the “second arrow”³. In this parable, when we suffer misfortune, 2 arrows are shot our way. The first is the actual event, which is undoubtedly painful and very often out of our control. The second arrow we shoot at ourselves by creating a story around the event, berating ourselves with our response to it and reliving it repeatedly. Psychologists describe this as the negativity bias of the brain. We dwell on the bad so that we will remember it and never, ever do it again.

Let’s use an example to depict this concept. Imagine you arrive at a calving in your first few months of practice. It’s 3 am and you’ve never been to this facility before. The client tried to get the calf out for 3 hours before finally calling you. When you arrive, the cow is down in lateral recumbency and all you see is a very swollen head of a dead calf protruding from a very swollen vulva. As you attempt to manipulate the head back into the uterus, it becomes clear that you cannot fix this dystocia in the manner in which you were taught: “repel and reposition”. You start to panic because the client is watching you like a hawk and you don’t know what to do. As you get lost in negative thought, your prefrontal cortex (the part of your brain that could come up with a solution to the problem) is hijacked by your amygdala (the part of your brain that is supremely unhelpful in this situation). You call your boss who arrives 45 minutes later, incredibly grumpy, works for 30 minutes and extracts the calf. As you drive away, your inner cattle prod begins berating you for your lack of expertise, you tell yourself a story about how your boss and the client think you are an idiot and you start to wonder if you will ever succeed in this industry. Sound familiar?

The first arrow is the difficult dystocia. You did not cause this cow to attempt to deliver a calf head-first. It is not your fault the client worked at it for so long before calling you. You are not at fault for your inexperience. All these factors are a normal component of the stressful job of veterinary

medicine. The second arrow is all the stories you will tell yourself about the event. Left unchecked, these stories will lead to decreased self-worth, increased imposter syndrome, difficulty taking constructive criticism, and ultimately poor job performance. How do you stop the second arrow?

Coping with Stress

In my opinion, meditation is a super power. It has a bad rap as a touchy-feely thing one does on a pillow surrounded by incense and weird music. In reality, it is the ability to see the thought-stream that runs on continuous loop through our minds. The act of meditation is simply sitting still, trying to focus on one thing and inevitably failing over and over as your mind wanders. The moment you notice you have gotten lost in thought, the moment when you fail at focusing, is the entire point of meditation. Like going to the gym, each moment you notice you have gotten lost in thought is a bicep curl for your brain.³ As you practice meditation, you get better at this “noticing” skill. This simple ninja move is the foundation for subsequent techniques to ease whatever stressful moment you face in practice.

Once you can wake up from your thoughts, you can begin to change your relationship to them. Three strategies are particularly good at this; gratitude, self-compassion, and checking your story. The daily practice of gratitude – simply noticing 3 specific, unique good things from each day - has been shown to improve levels of optimism, satisfaction in relationships, and job performance.¹ Psychology suggests gratitude practice subverts our negativity bias and instead gets us focused on the good.

Self-compassion is a powerful tool that physiologically downregulates the threat response and the sympathetic nervous system. The act of self-compassion has been widely shown to activate our mammalian care system, releasing oxytocin and endorphins, thereby lowering our stress levels.⁴ Psychologist Kristin Neff describes a simple 3 step move that can be employed when you notice yourself struggling. First, simply acknowledge that whatever you are experiencing is difficult. Second, remind yourself that this moment is difficult for many people, that you are not alone in your feelings. Lastly, send yourself some kindness and warmth, just as you would for a friend who was struggling with something similar, in other words, put down the hotshot. AABP aims to help with the shared experience component of self-compassion practice through the mentorship program and the Humans of AABP Facebook page. By sharing our rough times, we can remember that times can be hard for even the “toughest” of us.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the fallibility in the stories we tell ourselves. They will almost always be biased and at their worst, simply untrue. When you notice you

are lost in a story, ask yourself, “is it demonstrably true?” or better yet, ask the others involved if it is true.² Exposing the inaccuracy of our stories makes us believe them less and in turn, frees us from our self-critical minds.

Revisit our Example

Let’s return to the calving example to try out these strategies. The first step is to notice the thoughts that have carried you away while you are working the problem – their negativity is not helpful. Secondly, send yourself some compassion in that moment. That calving was hard, it would be hard for lots of people – heck, it was hard for the client! Lastly, when the dust has cleared, talk to your supervisor. Brene Brown suggests beginning with the preamble “The story I’m telling myself is...”² In this case, you could try “The story I’m telling myself is that I am a burden on you and will never improve at bad calvings.” I would hazard to guess your boss will have a completely different story to share about that moment and the conversation will improve your connection and relationship to one another. From this space, you will be better able to learn from the moment, rather than beat yourself up about it, which will improve your performance for next time.

Conclusion

Veterinary practice will always be inherently stressful and our sympathetic nervous systems will be perpetually activated by moments in our careers. However, the practices of mediation, gratitude, self-compassion, and story-checking can supercharge our ability to turn down the sympathetic response when it is no longer needed. Mastering these skills is not soft or feminine. In fact, they make us even tougher, more resilient and more capable to perform our jobs. They help us stop shooting the second arrow and go back to peacefully grazing on the plains.

References

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