

Balancing the hat rack

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Abstract

Veterinary medicine is a wonderful and rewarding profession. It can also be a challenging, demanding and stressful career. Practitioners need to be able to balance family, work, hobbies and other responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed. There are a plethora of podcasts, blogs, articles and books on well-being and work-life balance. Unfortunately, there is not an easy solution to balance life; what works for one person might not work for another. In this lecture, completing the stress cycle will be discussed, a method to measure overall well-being will be introduced, and the need to set priorities and tips and suggestions for work-life balance will be explored.

Key words: work-life balance, self-care, burnout, well-being, mental health

Background

In March of 2020, our lives were disrupted and forever changed. Veterinary medicine was already a challenging and stressful career, and Covid added another layer of complexity to our daily lives. The Merck Animal Health Wellbeing Study III, published in January of 2022, showed that burnout remains a serious issue among veterinarians, and that the percentage of veterinarians with serious psychological distress has increased since 2019, due in large part to the pandemic.¹ It is important for veterinarians to focus on work-life balance and self-care so they do not face burnout and mental health problems. One way to prevent burnout and manage stress is to live a well-balanced life according to your values.

Stress

Everyone has stress and stress is a frequent topic of conversation. However, you rarely hear people talking about stressors. Stressors are events that we consider challenging or threatening. Stress is the neurological and physiological reaction that occurs in response to stressors. We might not be able to get rid of the stressors, but we can release the stress if we know how to complete the stress response cycle (Figure 1).² Releasing stress can make our lives easier and decrease the chance of mental illness and burnout.

Monitoring well-being

Just like we monitor vital signs in a patient, we need to monitor our own well-being. Unfortunately, there is not a quick, easy, objective way to monitor well-being. The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) form (Figure 2) for major depression can be extrapolated to monitor well-being and is rapidly administered (personal communication: Steven A. Kohtz, MD). The PHQ9 was developed as a tool to monitor depression. It is only positive for major depression if the 1st or 2nd question is a 2 or 3 and you score a 1 to 3 for 5 of the total questions. However, independent of the PHQ9 form screening for major depression, the questionnaire is an excellent way to generally monitor well-being. In addition to asking about general symptoms of depression, it follows your energy, appetite, concentration, drive, sleep and self-talk.

In professional athletes, the PHQ9 has been administered weekly and increasing scores correlate with a decrease in performance.³ The use of the form has been studied in the general population and found to reliably predict decreases in productivity as the PHQ9 score increases. For each 1-point increase in the PHQ9 score, productivity decreases by 1.6%.⁴ While 1.6% might not seem like much, with a score of 5, that is an 8% decrease in productivity over baseline. If you normally have 20 appointment slots in a day, you would only be completing 18 in the same amount of time, thus adding more stress to your life and likely a decrease in revenue. Veterinarians should complete the PHQ9 form at least quarterly to establish a well-being baseline, or more frequently if they are feeling “off” or during times of extra stress (personal communication: Steven A. Kohtz, MD). Routinely using the PHQ9 form can give practitioners an objective way to keep tabs on their well-being.

What is health?

According to a definition adopted by the World Health Organization in 1948, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.⁵ In order to live a balanced life, you need to understand what is important to you and be able to prioritize.

Setting priorities

Life as a veterinarian, spouse/partner, caretaker of children and/or parents along with everything else we take on can be extremely difficult, challenging and stressful. Helping professions are exhausting, parenting is exhausting; burnout among medical professionals can be as high as 50%.⁶ You might be able to handle too much every day, and then one day an additional task puts you over the edge. Most veterinarians in large or mixed animal practices live in rural areas and take active roles in their communities. It is easy to suddenly have too much on your plate. Setting priorities and giving yourself permission to say no can be an important part of balancing life. Sitting down and listing your own values in order of importance, and then making daily decisions based upon those values can help you to live a more well-balanced life that considers physical, mental and social well-being. Some people will also choose to add spirituality to their definition of health.⁴ For example, the value-based priorities of one professional are faith, family, work, fitness and friends. He makes daily choices based on that list, and in that order (personal communication: Steven A. Kohtz, MD). Priorities might change throughout your life, especially during major life changes.

Strategies to try

What made you happy as a child? Can you implement those things into your life now? Give yourself permission to do something nice for yourself and do not feel guilty for doing it. Schedule your “me” time.⁶ If a client calls and wants to make an appointment at the same time you were planning on going to yoga, going grocery shopping, etc., it is okay to say no. You already have something scheduled during that time slot. No additional details need to be given, simply, “I have an appointment during that time period” is sufficient.

Limit decision fatigue. An adult makes about 35,000 conscious decisions daily.⁷ As your level of responsibility increases, so does the number of choices you are faced with. As a veterinarian, you likely make more than 35,000 decisions daily. You can limit decision fatigue in an attempt to reduce stressors by streamlining repetitive choices.⁸ In her book, *The Lazy Genius Way: Embrace What Matters, Ditch What Doesn't, and Get Stuff Done*, Kendra Adachi describes having the same weekly meals, creating a formula for daily dressing (button-down and jeans), getting the same gift for everyone for birthdays, etc. While this may seem boring, making some things on your to-do list easier can help you lead a more balanced life.

Manage your to-do list. Most people know making a daily, weekly and monthly do-to list can help keep them organized and allow them to be more efficient. However, studies have shown we chronically overestimate our competence and our ability to get things done.⁹ In order to be successful we need to set realistic goals and expectations of the amount of work we can finish. Make your to-do list and then cut out about one-quarter of the items on it. Veterinarians in general are highly functioning and can hard-charge through when needed, but when it becomes an everyday affair, it puts them in a constant state of high-anxiety (personal communication: Steven A. Kohtz, MD).

These are just a few of the multitude of strategizes that can be implemented to help relieve stressors and make you more efficient. Try to implement 1 or 2 or use these tips to spur another idea for you to try.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, veterinary medicine will never be a stress-free, easy profession. Developing tools to complete the stress cycle, monitoring your well-being, setting value-based life priorities and implementing a few strategizes to reduce stressors can help individuals live a more well-balanced life.

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