

November 2014

PROFESSIONAL WELLNESS CHECK-UP

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In light of the publicized suicides of a number of veterinarians in the past year, we are once again faced with an obvious need to improve wellness in our profession. It is something many of us still too frequently neglect, hoping things will just get better. Instead I believe we need to proactively support wellness for ourselves and each other in order to keep anyone else from going down that dark and very final road.

It is truly unfortunate that we have lost promising and caring members of our community and our hearts go out to the friends and family left behind. We wonder what 'made them do it' but we all have likely experienced dark periods of varying degrees. The veterinary profession is one that is highly stressful, highly emotional and often poorly understood by 'civilians'.

For many of us, veterinary medicine has been our goal and the passion that has driven us through school and onward. We love the challenges, the variety and, of course, the animals. What we did not know was how stressful and exhausting our chosen profession could be.

According to the World Health Organization, "mental health is a state of well-being in which every individual can realize his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." In other words, we feel good and comfortable dealing with challenges and are able to identify when we need to take action to restore balance. Even in the space of bad circumstances it is possible to restore a feeling of normalcy if we recognize our feelings, own them and take the necessary steps to restore balance.

Stress can build up when the balance between challenges and our state of self-care is tipped to the negative by outside circumstances. It's important to recognize that it is always a balance. Our foundation of health is weakened when outside stressors are allowed to pile up. It's very important to be willing to recognize when this is happening: when we strive to do so (as objectively as possible) we can better identify what we need to create equilibrium and decide on a plan of action.

Veterinary medicine has its own unique set of stressors. Many of us thought they would diminish once we graduated; instead they change and in some cases grow. Just a few sources of stress in our profession include long hours, client expectations, ethical issues and pressures of continuing education, personal relationships and finances. We also experience death at **five times** the rate of human doctors and our patients are often animals that we have treated for a long time. Don't discount the self-imposed stresses either: high expectations we have for ourselves or fears of appearing less than perfect only add to the problem.

Mental health claims in all professions are the fastest growing category of disability in the workplace, and will soon rival cardiovascular disease. Depression, anxiety and burnout are the three most common sources of mental distress leading to these claims. Medical professionals have a statistically higher incidence of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse. Studies have shown that health professionals have a 30% prevalence of substance abuse, mental illness and/or physical health problems during their lifetime. Even worse, people who could really benefit from support may not seek it because they fear a stigma attached to addiction or mental illness. Mental illnesses are recognized, medically diagnosable conditions that impair the thinking, mood or behavior of a person. There are many treatments and medications available from qualified professionals for assisting those with mental illness. There is no benefit to leaving mental illness unaddressed.

The strategies different people use to relieve stress and maintain balanced health are as unique as they are. We must do what we know we need to do to return to a state of internal equilibrium. If we don't do those things, it doesn't take long for what could at the outset be a more easily addressed problem to worsen. If we haven't yet found a strategy that works for us, it's worthwhile to keep trying new things. This is where we can benefit so much from sharing our stories of handling the maelstrom that is veterinary practice.

Here's something to think about: in our quest to show compassion to our patients, clients and staff, how often do we leave our own self-care requirements out of the formula? Buying into a belief that we must put ourselves second in order to be compassionate is self-defeating. At first it may seem ironic, but in truth it isn't - our personal health and balance are essential to our ability to extend compassion to others.

Another significant obstacle on the path of wellness is the belief that we are alone in our struggles. THIS IS NOT THE CASE. We are surrounded by colleagues often experiencing the very same things (and just as likely avoiding talking about them). Putting on a tough front, or worse, ignoring or denying a problem to ourselves, be it stress or something much worse, goes nowhere. We are much better off to recognize and accept our situation and take appropriate and non-judgmental action. Help and reassurance on the path to balanced wellness is more widely available all the time - in peoples' changing attitudes and in the many programs now existing to address the needs of all different professions.

Fortunately, the veterinary profession is answering the call for support from a growing wellness zeitgeist in our province with the creation of more programs and policies that recognize the ubiquity of professional stress. The SVMA shares this recognition and is invested in the promotion and support of the physical, mental and professional well-being of all of the members of the veterinary health care team and their families.

Support with financial management, stress management, work/life balance, mental illness, grief counseling, substance abuse and much more is available in multiple ways through your association. To start with, www.svma.sk.ca contains a long list of links for resources, programs and articles (See **Links** page, professional wellness resources).

Professional counselling support is available through the members' counselling service. Professional counselling can be particularly helpful when overwhelm has gone a bit too far and guidance in recognizing a problem and planning a course of action will help. (See Member's Side/ Programs/ [wellness program](#) for details.)

The SVMA's Professional Wellness Committee is dedicated solely to developing wellness supports and initiatives. Listen for news about wellness events presented by the Wellness committee in partnership with the USask Veterinary Social Work Initiatives committee, and look for articles about wellness issues and strategies in your quarterly **SVMA News**

Finally, join us at *Crave Kitchen & Wine Bar* in Regina on Monday November 24th for an informal discussion about professional stresses and burnout in practice hosted by Dr Darlene Chalmers. You won't want to miss this evening of delicious food, wine and conversation - a relaxing evening on all levels presented by VSWIC and the SVMA Professional Wellness Committee. If you would like to attend the Wellness evening, please RSVP to sgauthier@svma.sk.ca.

Pull quote:

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