

Veterinary Burnout

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Burnout is the gradual process by which a person, in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain, detaches from work and other meaningful relationships. Burnout is on the rise in helping professions such as human and veterinary medicine. The result of burnout is usually lowered productivity, cynicism and confusion. In general, burnout negatively affects personal and professional wellbeing.

There are several stages in the burnout process that blur together so that you rarely realize what is happening. The burnout process has been divided into 12 phases by some psychologists:

1. The Compulsion to Prove Oneself; demonstrating worth obsessively.
2. Working Harder; an inability to switch off.
3. Neglecting One's Needs; erratic sleeping, eating disrupted, lack of social interaction.
4. Displacement of Conflicts; problems are dismissed, we may feel threatened, panicky and jittery.
5. Revision of Values; values are skewed, friends and family dismissed, hobbies seen as irrelevant, work is only focus.
6. Denial of Emerging Problems; intolerance, perceiving employees as stupid, lazy, demanding, or undisciplined, social contacts harder; cynicism, aggression; problems are viewed as caused by time pressure and work, not because of life changes.
7. Withdrawal; social life small or non-existent, need to feel relief from stress, alcohol/drugs.
8. Odd behavioral changes; changes in behavior obvious, friends and family concerned.
9. Depersonalization; seeing neither self nor others as valuable and no longer perceive own needs.
10. Inner Emptiness; feeling empty inside and to overcome this, look for activity such as overeating, sex, alcohol, or drugs; activities are often exaggerated.
11. Depression; feeling lost and unsure, exhausted, future feels bleak and dark.
12. Burnout Syndrome; can include total mental and physical collapse; time for full medical attention.

In the beginning you loved your job. You were full of enthusiasm and had boundless energy for it. As time passes however, you begin to feel drained physically, mentally and emotionally. You start to think that something is wrong but you can't seem to put your finger on it. The job isn't quite what you expected and you start to feel disappointed and disillusioned. You try working harder but this only leaves you feeling more exhausted and frustrated. You start to doubt your ability and competence and your confidence level drops. In response to feeling inadequate and insecure you begin to blame others for your difficulties. You become withdrawn, detached and ashamed. The negativity in your attitude increases and you may engage in escapist behaviors such as drinking, eating or shopping to cope with worry and disillusionment. You are in full scale burnout when you reach the point where you feel like a failure, you are overwhelmed and are in despair.

Veterinarians are reported to have the highest incidence rate of suicide among all occupations, and twice as high as physicians and dentists. Surveyed veterinarians indicate that stress and burnout (includes compassion fatigue) were the most important wellness issues affecting the veterinary community. Compassion fatigue is the emotional burden that occurs as a result of continued and excessive exposure to traumatic events that patients and families experience. Many veterinarians believe that there are not adequate resources to deal with wellness issues.

Although we all live in a stressful environment, not everyone experiences burnout. The potential for burnout can increase based on individual characteristics. A person who does not have a balance between work and personal commitments is at higher risk of burnout. Also at risk is the perfectionist who has unrealistic standards and expectations of themselves, their job and others. Other factors that increase risk of burnout include: a lack of control over one's workload or schedule, absence of feedback so that one cannot see or appreciate the results of his or her efforts, conflict among workers or between workers and management, and anxiety about the possibility of failure. Fortunately there are coping strategies which veterinarians can adopt to prevent burnout or to rebuild themselves once they have experienced it.

To cope with burnout it is important to:

- Pay attention to your health. Eat a balanced diet, get enough rest and be sure to exercise.
- Leave work behind. Don't bring work home with you. Try to create a balance of activities you enjoy outside of work and be sure to set aside at least one day of the week to focus on anything but work.
- Get proper and sufficient support around you. Let others know you are having difficulty and ask for help. Be specific in your request, whether this is the need for them to listen and provide emotional support or to perform concrete tasks that will make your life easier.
- Cut back on responsibilities. If you feel the main issue is an overload of work, prioritize tasks and identify which ones can be eliminated or delegated to others.
- Focus on what you can control. Make a distinction between the things in your personal or work life that you can control and those you can't.
- Take mini breaks during the work day, take a short walk, listen to music, stretch. Treat yourself to something special or relaxing and don't feel guilty about doing so.
- If you feel stressed dealing with certain clinical situations such as ophthalmic cases for example, take extra continuing education in this area to become more knowledgeable and you will look forward to the next case.
- If you believe you are nearing or at the burnout stage, seek professional guidance and support.

The need for professional wellness programs specifically for veterinarians has been recognized in recent years. Veterinary associations around the world are starting to address the issue of mental health in veterinarians. Programs addressing issues such as burnout are becoming available in Canada. Further work needs to be done to provide awareness and support to veterinarians suffering from burnout.

1. *Veterinary Wellness – Burnout and health promotion in veterinary medicine. Brenda L. Lovell and Raymond T. Lee.*
2. *The 12 Stages of Burnout – from a Scientific American Mind article. Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North*
3. *Understanding Stress and Burnout – Workhealthlife by Shepell*