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AN ANONYMOUS SASKATCHEWAN VETERINARIAN



THE HUMAN SIDE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

While I am writing this, I'm sitting in my office feeling guilty because I have set a boundary. A boundary that was necessary, is reasonable and defensible. Yet I am full of anxiety and feel sick to my stomach.

As veterinarians, we work in a professional environment where the default expectation by many colleagues is that you should put yourself last and if you say "no", as justifiable as that "no" may be, you wear the "N" like a scarlet letter on your forehead. So instead, we say "yes", to everything.

Two years ago, I was one of those people – I thought it was absolutely natural to put myself last, to bend over backwards and spend my working days (and nights, and weekends) running around like crazy, chronically overcommitted, and "killing" myself trying to please everyone. The only person that I forgot in that scenario was myself.

The turning point came when I had to find out that my husband was cheating on me. It took a major life crisis, recovering from a terrible betrayal and going through a divorce, to examine my life and come to the conclusion that things had to change.

Initially, always having been the one to not let anyone down and just "suck it up and soldier on", I continued to go to work and kept all of my work-related commitments. Once again, this was for the sake of others: my colleagues, clients and patients;

it seemed more important than my own mental health and recovery.

It probably won't come as a surprise to anyone that this approach did not work long-term.

In the past year, I have gone through counseling, a medical leave and have spent a lot of time reading, thinking and examining my choices. Part of that process was the realization that I need better boundaries and that I have as much of a responsibility to my own well-being as I do to others. Moving forward, I am as committed to my job as ever and continue to be hard-working and ambitious; however, I am no longer prepared to put myself last. Sometimes that means having to say "no".

Reaching this conclusion is one thing, but living it is an ongoing daily challenge. I still find myself feeling guilty for saying "no", and continue to be haunted by the feeling that I have to justify my boundaries. It remains a work in progress. Fortunately, I have some very special people in my life who care about me and help me through the tough times.

In conclusion, yes we are a profession of helpers and caregivers, we deeply care about our colleagues, clients and our patients, but we also have a responsibility to ourselves, because if we push ourselves to the brink of mental and physical exhaustion, we are not helping anyone.