

YOUR CAREER / PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

HALT!

GIVE YOUR TEAM A BREAK

By Terra Shastri, OVMA

Working for long stretches without breaks leads to stress and exhaustion. It also takes a toll on workplace morale and can affect your team's engagement. If your team is experiencing issues, often an easy solution is to make sure staff receive breaks throughout their shift.

Unfortunately, not taking breaks is common in the medical community, among both human health and veterinary practitioners. In the UK, many medical facilities and veterinary hospitals are raising awareness of the issue using a campaign that's been around for decades, called HALT. This initiative reminds teams in the medical community about the importance of taking breaks to improve their health and well-being.

HALT STANDS FOR:

H – Are you hungry or thirsty?

A – Are you feeling anxious or angry?

L – Is it late? Are you lonely?

T – Are you tired?

Guy's Hospital and St. Thomas' Hospital in London, England, implemented the HALT campaign in March of 2017.

"The HALT campaign reiterates our commitment to ensuring that all staff take their breaks, and that we create a 'take a break' culture," says Eileen Sills, chief nurse at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals. "Taking a break gives our staff the chance to take a breather and to replenish energy levels by eating or having a drink, physically resting or taking a mental break. As well as being important for staff health and well-being,

taking breaks is also important for patients, as it allows staff to make the best possible decisions for our patients."

While aspects of HALT may seem obvious, the instinctive need to achieve the goal in front of us often overshadows the logic of staying hydrated, taking a break or addressing sources of stress. This is often combined with social pressure from team members, especially managers and practice owners, who don't take breaks themselves. This produces a culture of "pushing through" regardless of how staff members are feeling.

Canada's Employment Standards Act says: "Employees work no more than five hours in a row before receiving a 30-minute meal break. Employee(s) who are splitting the 30-minute eating period into two periods have agreed to this, either electronically, in writing or orally, and that both periods are taken within five consecutive hours." This isn't always followed in busy clinics when there doesn't appear to be time for breaks. But it's the employer's responsibility to ensure that staff are taking the breaks they're entitled to—it's good for staff, the patients and the clinic.

For their HALT campaigns, Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals have recommended working no more than five hours without a 20-minute break. This was challenging at first, since it required organizing when staff could take breaks and staggering them so patient care was still available.

Every organization is different and there's no "one size fits all" solution, but it

starts with a few simple questions: What is achievable for you and your team in practice? How can you work together to ensure that breaks are taken fairly and safely? A break or even a short pause provides an opportunity to "check-in" with ourselves and notice how we're feeling and what might be affecting us.

Taking care of your team's wellbeing is important, and part of that means taking breaks. Introduce HALT to your staff at your next staff meeting and start your own clinic campaign. Post a HALT sign in your staff room or somewhere in your hospital where all team members will see it frequently (download one at www.ovma.org/assets/1/6/HLT_handout.pdf).

Remember, it's not enough to tell staff members to take a break, so create a break schedule. The break schedule outlines the times a team member will be on break and assigns someone to cover their role when necessary. For example, Amy, the client service representative, is on break from 11:30 a.m. to noon, and Lindsay, the animal care assistant, will cover reception during that time.

HALT is helping to raise awareness about observing and evaluating elements key to physical and mental well-being. It also provides a starting place to build a clinic culture supportive of well-being and self-care, which benefits the people, the practice and patients.

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HALT: Take a break



Working for long hours without taking a break isn't healthy for you, your colleagues or your patients. If you are Hungry, Anxious, Late or Tired, you're less productive and it's more difficult to make decisions effectively. **HALT** encourages you to focus on your health and well-being, and is a reminder to take your breaks.

Consider the following mental health and wellness indicators:

Are you:

Hungry or thirsty

Are you:

Anxious or angry

Are you:

Late or feeling lonely

Are you:

Tired

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Plan your breaks: ensure all staff members know when their breaks are.
2. Work as a team: create a break schedule that outlines when a team member will be on break and assigns someone to cover their role when necessary.
3. Create a "take a break" practice culture: lead by example, and create an environment where breaks are encouraged.