



## Stress and the Veterinary Profession

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**Received:** March 14, 2022

**Published:** March 23, 2022

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It is anticipated that any profession that deals with health issues and life-and-death decisions will have associated stress, and yet this alone does not explain the near epidemic rates of suicide amongst veterinary team members in many parts of the world. While the ultimate causes of such extreme reactions to stress are complex, there are some aspects of veterinary medicine that are worthy of reflection in the hopes of a better understanding of why the profession seems so susceptible to this problem.

### Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue results from the type of work being performed, and everyone in the “caring” professions is likely similarly at risk. It results from the trauma of witnessing and dealing with the suffering of others. There are many such stressful events that veterinary teams encounter on a regular basis, including illness, euthanasia, cruelty to animals, and the fact that it is not always possible to provide services to clients when they are unable or unwilling to pay. Veterinary teams want to help animals, but eventually even the most compassionate individuals can become indifferent or emotionally exhausted by the non-stop nature of caring.

### Burnout

While compassion fatigue results from the type of work that veterinary teams deliver, burnout results from stress associated with the work environment itself. This can result from work overload, conflict in the workplace, lack of control over duties or responsibilities, not receiving the level of pay that would be commensurate with efforts extended, and many other stressors. It is important to remember that burnout and compassion fatigue can affect all members of the hospital team, not just veterinarians.

### Compromise fatigue

While compassion fatigue results from the type of work being delivered, and burnout tends to result from stress in the work environment, compromise fatigue results from interpersonal conflict

with animal owners and other stakeholders, and stress associated with not being able to deliver the level of care desired, either because animal owners don't accept recommendations being made, because they can't or won't spend the money needed to care for their animals, or because of differing goals of clinicians and hospital management. It can be particularly vexing when clients expect veterinary teams to provide the care for their animals that they did not anticipate and plan for, or when they expect that our efforts should be more charitable because we work with animals. In human medicine, the term “moral injury” is sometimes used to indicate the distress that occurs in trying to reconcile the needs of many stakeholders, including the hospital, the patient, the insurer, and the medical team.

### Imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is increasingly being recognized in medical professionals and students, and results from the situation where we feel we need to present ourselves as experts, when perhaps we do not consider ourselves as such. In a profession where there is some expectation that veterinarians know everything about all species and breeds, and are proficient in all disciplines (surgery, ophthalmology, dentistry, emergency and critical care, etc.), is it at all surprising that from time to time, individuals may feel that they don't measure up to the image they are trying to project to the public? In human medicine, physicians often go through internship and residency programs before they are expected to take full patient responsibility, while in veterinary medicine, there is often a negligible grace period between graduating from veterinary school and working within the profession with full patient accountability. While there are programs such as mentorships that can help improve competencies in multiple disciplines and procedures, it is overwhelming to assume that we can all become experts in all aspects of clinical care – and do so immediately upon graduation [1-7].

## Conclusion

While there are no simple solutions to the impact of stress on the veterinary profession, the first step is to admit that these stressors are real, and stresses that become manifested are unlikely to resolve on their own. For individuals that perceive that admitting that these stressors exist is a sign of weakness, we need to collectively correct this misinformation. Stress is a natural part of life, and developing coping mechanisms is healthy, but acknowledging that stress can become toxic and can quickly affect our wellbeing, and satisfaction with the profession, is critical. Seeking help when it is needed, is very appropriate for a profession that thrives on caring, preventive care, early detection of problems, and appropriate treatment.

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