

A Modern Guide to Managing Stress in the Veterinary Practice

How to Cope with Daily Stressors,
Restore Professional Fulfillment
& Preserve Veterinary Team Well-Being



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And yet, you show up. Day in, day out.

Your love of animals and your desire to heal and nurture are what keep you going.

When you can alleviate a patient's pain and suffering; when you see a client's joy and relief after a positive prognosis; when a pet owner becomes a partner in proactively caring for their pet – these moments may be all the reminder you need for why you're doing this work in the first place.

But there's the other side of the story – the confluence of stressors that makes this work feel like a repeating cycle of fatigue and burnout with seemingly no end in sight. [The reported level of serious psychological distress](#) in veterinarians has risen significantly since 2019 – from 6.4% to 9.7% – and for veterinary staff that number is almost double, at a stunning 18.1%.

Morale has [taken a hit as well](#), with less than 50% of veterinary practitioners recommending the profession and one in five regretting

their decision to take up this work. [The turnover rate for veterinarians](#) (over 15%) is twice as high as that of physicians. In addition, veterinary technicians have one of the highest turnover rates (25%) of all healthcare professions.

At the most tragic end of this spectrum is [the rate of suicidality](#) in the profession. Veterinarians are 2.7 times more likely than the general public to die by suicide, and one in six have contemplated ending their lives.

We know there's a problem.

And we know there must be a better way. What can be done to alleviate not only the day-to-day stressors but those associated with the bigger picture of veterinary medicine?

To answer this question, first we must gain a clear understanding of the factors that drive such intense levels of stress and fatigue in veterinary practices.

**“This isn’t what
I signed up for.”**

It’s the quiet utterance
of countless individuals
in the veterinary field.

The Primary Causes of Stress in Veterinary Practice



The Day-to-Day Stressors

Oftentimes the pace of the day starts before it even begins, with drop-in appointments and crises to attend to before scheduled appointments have even begun. There are phone calls to make, office dynamics to manage, co-workers to support...

The feeling of constantly running behind is compounded by the fact that the majority of veterinary practices are understaffed. This was, by far, [the biggest concern](#) cited by 91% of veterinarians polled in 2021.

Alongside the intense pace of the average day is the nature of the work itself, defined in large measure by

the sick, hurt, or dying patients you show up for every day. The physical and emotional exhaustion that comes with this is referred to as compassion fatigue. But, in fact, compassion fatigue runs even deeper than exhaustion – it's trauma.

As if the compassion and care you pour into your patients weren't enough, there are also human dynamics at play. Clients project their acute emotions onto you while you strive to offer comfort and advocate for what's best for their pet – even when they don't agree. And when financial constraints become clear, you struggle to deliver the best care possible.

91%

of veterinarians say understaffing is their biggest concern

Source: [Merck Animal Health](#)



What Is Compassion Fatigue?

Compassion fatigue, also referred to as vicarious trauma, is the physical and mental exhaustion as well as emotional impact that arises from prolonged exposure to the trauma and illness of others. The high intensity and strenuous pace of their work puts veterinary professionals at particular risk.

Here are some of the symptoms of compassion fatigue:

- **Intrusive thoughts, dreams, and/or nightmares**
- **Pessimism, apathy, and detachment**
- **Hypervigilance and increased sensitivity to stressors**
- **Self-medication and addictive behavior**
- **Withdrawal and isolation**
- **Poor quality of sleep**
- **Emotional numbing**
- **A loss of interest in or sense of efficacy with work**
- **Anhedonia, i.e a loss of interest in things that were previously enjoyable**
- **Diminished self-care, including hygiene**
- **Loss of appetite, headaches, poor digestion, and exhaustion**
- **Anxiety and/or depression**
- **Difficulty concentrating**

The first, most important step in addressing compassion fatigue is to identify it. Depending on the severity of symptoms and how quickly they're identified, treatment and resolution can range anywhere from employing self-care practices to a more clinical level of treatment. This may include participating in psychotherapy and/or psychiatric care to manage symptoms.

Beyond the Day-to-Day Stressors

Beyond the intensity of the day-to-day are deeper, underlying stressors at work that make this load feel so much heavier at times.

After many years put into training to enter the veterinary profession, there are many more spent managing the student debt that came along with it. While the average workday is long – upwards of 45-60+ hours per week – managing this debt often requires taking on a second source of income. [The average salary](#) for a veterinarian is around \$88,000, while [student debt](#) averages \$157,000 – a disparity not easily ignored. The median salary for a veterinary technician is around \$39,000, which breaks down to \$15 per hour – a rate of pay equivalent to entry-level jobs in retail or food

service that are arguably less strenuous.

And then there was the start of the pandemic. The stressors already highlighted may not be new to veterinary practice, but the effects of Covid most certainly compounded them. As a result, many offices have been left reeling. Lack of staff, increased chance of virus exposure, and even longer work days topped the list of stressors for veterinarians.

Although the world at large has rebounded to a new normal, it's crucial to consider the state of veterinary practice: that the challenges the pandemic inflamed weren't new but only deepened complexities already at play.

\$157,000

average student debt
among veterinarians

Source: [AVMA](#)

8 Strategies for Relieving Stress in the Veterinary Practice



As a veterinary practitioner, it's in your nature to heal, to fix, to solve. A natural response to the state of affairs in the veterinary field is to ask, "How can this be addressed and who will address it?"

"We're creatures of habit," says licensed therapist Nadine Diefenbacher, LMFT. "The longer we maintain negative habits that result in stress, the stress just compounds and results in a cumulative effect."

Diefenbacher recommends beginning with changes that are "small and doable," or even to "piggyback onto something you're already doing." An example of how to introduce a short meditation into your day: "If you already get up to make a cup of

coffee every morning, tag a five-minute meditation onto that existing habit."

Change in the clinic calls for the combined efforts of individual practitioners and the organization you work with. Even the population you serve can play a part by simply being informed through education and awareness.

When it comes to the "how," a number of stress-relieving strategies can be employed at both the individual and organizational levels. Creating awareness is the first, most foundational of these strategies. The more we're "having the conversation," the better equipped we'll be to bring relief to the vital work of veterinary care.



Individual Stress Management Strategies

While the following strategies are organized as “individual” and “organizational,” they often overlap and commingle. Veterinary management teams can be trained to identify the symptoms of compassion fatigue and distress in their colleagues and encourage these strategies at the individual level.

01. Monitor and Manage Physical Health

Stress management can come in many forms – in the realms of both physical and mental health. Due to the intense nature of day-to-day life as a veterinary practitioner, your autonomic nervous system is likely on consistent overload and your adrenals are working overtime.

For this reason, tending to your physical health first – in order to calm these systems – will help create a pathway to addressing stress in the emotional realm. Put simply, when you’re physiologically in constant

fight-or-flight mode, your mind just isn’t available to heal.

“Keep your body in movement,” Diefenbacher says. “It doesn’t always have to be in the form of exercise.. If you like music, turn some on and dance around for a few minutes. The physical movement of your body decreases the stress response of your autonomic nervous system and those overstimulated stress reactions.” Some simple yet effective ways to manage your physical health include:

Getting enough sleep

A lack of proper rest lays the foundation for a myriad of issues, both physical and mental.

A healthful diet

Even a simple shift to consuming more whole foods, versus processed and refined ones, can have a significant impact on physical health. This may mean sourcing and preparing food ahead of time, instead of grab-and-go, on-the-fly foods that seem so conducive to a busy workday. The time and effort are well-spent and well worth it.

A healthful diet also includes proper hydration, which can often run counter to the high levels of caffeine you may rely on to get through a long and stressful day. A dehydrated body is a stressed and fatigued body. Keeping a reusable water bottle on the desk will serve as a reminder to sip and replenish regularly. Add sliced cucumber or fruit to the bottle to make hydration even more flavorful.

Incorporating exercise/movement

You're on your feet and in motion most of the day. But there's a big difference between being in constant, possibly stress-inducing motion and mindful, intentional movement of your body. If possible, use breaks during the day to take a walk or do some simple stretching. Or build stress-relieving activities into other parts of your day, whether waking up a few minutes earlier in the morning or using evening time that you might otherwise spend relaxing on the couch. Any form of light exercise can help offset the effects of fatigue and trauma.

Monitoring alcohol consumption

Any highly stressful work environment brings an increased vulnerability to addiction. Being mindful of over-consuming alcohol is crucial in the effective management of stress. Beyond acknowledgment, seeking help for unhealthy, addictive behaviors is the other vital piece of this often complex but solvable puzzle. An organization like [SMART Recovery](#) offers self-managed treatment and recovery plans for anyone struggling with addiction.



02. Tend to Your Mental Health

In the context of your mental and emotional health, there are many stress management practices that can be used “on the spot” as well as outside the workplace.

Breathing

While it may seem overly simple, that’s a large part of the beauty of breathwork: it’s simple and can be done anywhere, at any time. Breathwork has many positive effects, including a soothing of the sympathetic nervous system and in-the-moment stress management. This practice can be as straightforward as becoming aware of your breathing and taking deep, diaphragm-level breaths or counting slowly as you inhale and exhale.

A number of easily integrated [breathwork practices](#) may also be learned ahead of time and put into use whenever needed.

Mindfulness and meditation practices

These are strategies you can use either in the moment or outside the workplace. [Mindfulness practices](#) can be as simple as grounding yourself and your senses in the present moment, or it can include slightly more involved exercises such as body scan meditation – bringing intense awareness to different parts of your body – or listening to guided relaxation.

Journaling and thought work

Our thoughts dictate how we feel about the events in our lives. And while often we can’t control what comes up in the day-to-day, we can control what we think about it. Sometimes easier said than done during work, documenting thoughts that send our emotions and reactions reeling can have a profound effect on stress levels.

The simple practice of journaling, even 10–15 minutes per day, can help with the slowing and examination of thoughts that may not be serving you in the context

Individual and group therapy

Lastly, in the context of tending to your mental health for the management of stress, working with a professional therapist or counselor can be incredibly helpful. Effective therapy creates a safe container for processing and resolving issues that may be impacting your ability to manage stress and function at a healthy level.



03. Engage With a Community

Even if you work with a team of veterinary professionals, managing the stress of your work can feel like a lonely endeavor. Depending on your personality type, it may feel challenging to engage with a community. However, affirming that you are not alone can be well worth going outside of your comfort zone and highly effective in alleviating stress.

Diefenbacher recommends finding fellow veterinary professionals who “get it” and to whom “you don’t have to qualify or explain yourself.” Even if not much is said, she says, “just being with someone who knows what your day-to-day struggles and challenges are can be extremely helpful.”

When it comes to finding a community to interact with, there are a variety of places to look and ways to engage:

Your coworkers

Ideally there’s camaraderie with your fellow veterinary practitioners. Fostering relationships with people who can understand exactly what you’re experiencing can be a powerful strategy for stress management.

This could take the form of organizing or participating in activities together outside the work setting, finding a coworker to take a walk with during a break, or even engaging in debriefing conversations following particularly stressful situations.

Your personal interests

The activities you enjoy outside the workplace are an excellent source of stress management in and of themselves. And they can also offer communities to be part of which have nothing to do with your work.

Some examples of interest-based communities are church groups, sports teams, and hobby-related groups like hiking clubs or crafting circles. Again, the benefit here is twofold: you’re setting aside time for a healthy, non-work-related activity and surrounding yourself with a like-minded community.

Veterinary-specific supportive communities

There are communities and organizations explicitly dedicated to the cause of supporting veterinary practitioners, including those in crisis. Though engaging with these groups is often on a virtual level, it also means these communities are generally more easily accessible.

Organizations like [Not One More Vet](#), [The Veterinary Confessionals Project](#), and [Thrive](#) (from VetX International) provide opportunities to engage with your community of peers and also offer ways to make connections more locally with events and groups.



Find a community. Find your way.

Thrive, a program of VetX International, offers peer-based support and mentoring through a series of non-clinical training modules.

[Join Thrive](#)

“The old saying goes: a problem shared is a problem halved. And there is nothing any veterinarian faces that has not been faced and overcome before. Being part of a community gives you access to a huge wealth of experience which can come in the form of a sympathetic ear or specific advice.”

At VetX, we baked community into our training program in the form of live group mentoring, online forums, and social media groups – each of which has been super helpful for allowing vets to connect, access mentors, and opportunities. The small group coaching sessions in particular have been incredible in their impact. Through these sessions, with some relatively simple advice, we’ve helped hundreds of veterinary professionals engage and enjoy their work. Literally saving careers and getting things back to good.”

Dave Nicol, Practice owner & VetX International Director

Organizational Stress Management Strategies

Now that we've taken a look at some ways individual practitioners can implement stress management strategies, let's take a step back and consider some that veterinary organizations can employ.

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the most important strategy veterinary practices can participate in is awareness. Learning to recognize the early signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue can translate to a proactive (versus a reactive) approach to practitioner distress, burnout, and ultimately resignation – or worse.

As well as recognizing signs of distress, veterinary management teams can take a more proactive approach by encouraging self-assessment tools early and regularly in the work cycles of practitioners. [The Professional Quality of Life \(ProQOL\) assessment](#) and the [HeartMath Institute's Personal Well-Being Survey](#) are examples of these kinds of resources.

Aside from awareness, monitoring, and assessment, other systemic pieces can be put in place to support veterinary staff and aid in the management of stress.

04. Encourage Personal and Professional Development

An effective way to alleviate stress in the veterinary workplace is to help practitioners take a step back from the intensity of the day-to-day. Encouraging participation in both professionally and personally enriching activities offers the perspective that these are important, valuable people who are there to do more than just manage the constant flow of daily tasks.

This could involve mentoring and supervision practices as well as funding and/or providing leave for professional development activities. The [AVMA](#) website, for example, is an excellent source for well-being courses, veterinary conferences, and certification programs that staff can be encouraged to participate in.

05. Facilitate Healthy Work Practices

There are a variety of management strategies veterinary practices can employ to facilitate lower levels of fatigue and stress in staff members. Some of these include:

- Ensuring sufficient time between shifts
- Awareness of the length of shifts
- Enforcing the taking of breaks
- Attention to the amount of staff working at any given time
- Monitoring the types of tasks staff are being asked to perform and intermingling lower stress activities with periods of higher intensity activities
- Facilitating requests for time off whenever possible

06. Foster a Supportive Workplace Culture

A veterinary practice can proactively set the tone of the workplace to facilitate a lower-stress environment.

For example, employee assistance programs can be utilized to provide supportive services, including counseling, for staff members.

Aside from expressing concern and regard for staff well-being through programs like this, veterinary practices can also creatively encourage a culture of safety and care. This could include things like ensuring a quiet space for staff to take breaks away from the stimulating nature of the workplace.

Planning simple yet meaningful events for staff members, like snacks in the breakroom, can also help create a culture of camaraderie and support. Lastly, attention to safety measures is a meaningful way in which veterinary practices can communicate care and regard for staff members' welfare and help decrease overall stress.

"Practice culture is a whole team responsibility," says Dave Nicol,

director of VetX International.

"The leaders of a clinic must set the cultural tone through words and deeds, and hold others accountable to act in a way that strengthens a positive culture. The practices that have understood and committed to growing their culture each and every day are the ones who are bucking the trend of high staff turnover. Plus they are not struggling to recruit staff."



Be the leader your team deserves

Join VetX International's Leaders, insightful and inclusive management training for veterinarians and practice managers looking to build an amazing workplace culture.

Save 10% on Leaders: At the link, click "Apply Now." Under "How did you find out about Leaders?" on the application form, simply type "Provet Cloud" to receive 10% off.

[Join Today](#)

07. Build Relationships

The relationship between pet owners and veterinary staff members often plays a significant role in the dynamic of stress in the veterinary workplace. Veterinary practices can both support their staff and improve on this dynamic by helping pet owners understand the expertise and role of staff members.

While this may be "out of the box"

thinking when it comes to stress management strategies, it can also be as simple as intentionally incorporating education into conversations with pet owners. Not only will they feel informed and empowered, but a shift in understanding could significantly improve the nature of their interactions with veterinary staff.

08. Ensure Efficient Practices

A powerful way in which veterinary practices can help manage stress is to tend to the infrastructure of daily practices. This means ensuring that staff have the proper tools and resources, including key automations through their practice management software, to be able to work as efficiently as possible.

Consider that outdated or inadequate technology in your practice may be making things more difficult. Streamlining processes and addressing the technical nuances of delivering quality care can have a deep and lasting impact on day-to-day practices.

While Covid certainly brought challenges for many practices, the pandemic also accelerated

technology adoption in the veterinary clinic. This has included things like incorporating more [digital practices](#) to help you save time and focus on what matters most – caring for patients and facilitating the growth of your practice.

Changing habits – whether individual or organizational – to reduce stress and improve well-being can be difficult. Diefenbacher cautions against trying to change everything all at once. “Start with one area of change,” she says, “because you don’t want the new habit you’re trying to create to add to your stress. Work on one area, make it doable, and if you can couple it with something else you’re doing on a regular basis, it’ll make it easier for you to make that change.”



How Technology Can Help Reduce Stress and Improve Care



As a software company, we believe that technology can play an important role in reducing stressors that veterinary practices experience every day. And in our experience working with veterinarians and their teams, we have found that adopting the following solutions can help practices run more smoothly and improve the level of care you provide.

Better Client Communication

One of the keys to streamline veterinary workflows is by improving client communication. Here are three ways technology can help you communicate more effectively with clients:

- Customer relationship management (CRM) software can help you manage client communications and keep track of interactions
- [Automated text and email reminders](#) allow you to stay in touch with clients and ensure that they don't miss appointments or other important deadlines
- Online forms can help you collect valuable client feedback and identify areas where your clinic needs to make improvements

Digital Record-Keeping

Another way to build efficiency is by [digitizing record-keeping](#). This is especially important given the increased focus on data and analytics in the veterinary field. Online records can help you:

- Track key information and make sense of complex data sets
- Access patient records from anywhere, at any time
- Quickly and easily share information with other members of the veterinary team
- Keep your data secure, even in the event of a disaster
- Future-proof your practice by eliminating the need for paper records

Seamless Scheduling

Technology can improve veterinary workflows by making scheduling more efficient. The following solutions can help you streamline the scheduling process:

- **Online appointment-setting** software allows clients to book appointments directly, cutting back on wasted time spent scheduling
- **An integrated appointment calendar** can help you keep track of upcoming appointments and quickly find open slots in your schedule
- **Pre-registration forms gather important information** in advance, reducing paperwork and making the check-in process simpler and more efficient

Better Billing & Payment Processing

Billing and payment processing is a crucial part of running any practice, but it can often be time-consuming and error-prone. Here's how technology can help:

- **[Practice management software](#)** can automate many of the tasks associated with billing and payments, saving you time and reducing the risk of human error
- **Online payment** portals make it easy for clients to pay invoices and can help you get paid faster



Client feedback and the secret to a happier team

“Most client complaints come from a breakdown in communication,” says Dr. Jenny Reason of Bury St. Edmunds Veterinary Centre. Her practice’s solution has been to leverage their practice software to automatically include an invitation for client feedback in every post-consult email.

Despite practices’ fear of receiving negative feedback, Dr. Reason says “we have found most people to be super happy in their consultation feedback,” says Dr. Reason.

And she has seen the impact that positive feedback has had on her team – “a constant reminder that people do respect and like what we do.”

Dr. Reason can draw a direct connection between client dialogue and staff retention: “We’ve not lost a single clinical team member in the three years since we opened.”

[READ THE WHOLE STORY](#)

Where We Go From Here



It's clear that stress levels in our veterinary practices are slowly eroding this community of caregivers, including its love of the profession. There's no hindsight-focused blame to be placed.

One value in "looking back" is to understand the nature of the problem and to bring awareness to the surface. The work, then, is to move forward and take diligent and consistent action to address stress in the veterinary setting – at any and all levels possible. As has been outlined here, this includes both individual and systemic management.

Individual practitioners can and should be active participants in preserving their love of and commitment to this

profession. This requires awareness and ownership of the issue by both the individual and the practices they support.

Veterinary practices can take the role of both leadership and service to their staff members. This involves proactively addressing the topic of stress in the workplace with the strategies outlined here, as well as taking a stance of advocacy for veterinary staff. Attention to management strategies, workplace culture, and efficiency of practices are the most significant and effective places to take a stand against the destructive nature of stress in the veterinary profession.



5 Takeaways to Put Into Action Today



Nurture a more open and communicative team culture.

Whether a leader in the clinic or one of the staff, help set the example of talking honestly about not only the challenges but the bright spots in your work. Consider dedicating a portion of staff meetings to share daily or weekly highs and lows – an opportunity to offer collective support, encouragement, and motivation.



Assess and clarify the roles of team members in the practice.

If some staff struggle with feeling fulfilled in their position, it may be time to investigate whether they're able to contribute to the best of their abilities and training. Are there responsibilities that can be better delegated and to help them feel more invested in their role?



Actively value individual wellness.

Encouraging many of the self-care techniques outlined earlier may be important to team members feeling they have permission to schedule breaks when they are needed. Consider posting signage in the break room, for instance, reminding staff to “Breathe” or “Stay hydrated” or “Take a walk break.”



Review the processes and systems in the practice.

Consult with your staff to identify where inefficiencies are causing strain or prolonging otherwise routine tasks. Then assess whether the tools and solutions you're providing are actually helping or creating more complications.



Don't strive for perfection.

Expect that veterinary work will always be challenging and, on many levels, unpredictable. Instead, be vigilant of heightened stress in the practice, and don't simply accept it as the norm. Any efforts to acknowledge and reduce stress and burnout will show your team that this workplace values their well-being and the important work they do.

Helpful Links and Resources

[**Not One More Vet**](#) provides support to all members of veterinary teams and students who are struggling with self-doubt or depression or are considering suicide.

[**The Veterinary Confessionals Project**](#) aims to provide a “safe and anonymous outlet for emotion and creativity” to anyone in the veterinary profession who may be dealing with burnout, suicidal thoughts, or feelings of isolation.

[**VetX International**](#) A community for all veterinarians featuring a wealth of content – through courses, articles, newsletters, podcasts, and more – to help veterinary professionals develop their skills and nurture healthy team cultures.

[**SMART Recovery**](#) offers self-managed treatment plans and community-based support for anyone struggling with addiction.

[**AVMA well-being courses**](#) cover topics that include stress management, workplace culture, community support, team building, resilience, suicide prevention, and more.

[**The Professional Quality of Life \(ProQOL\) assessment**](#) (from AVMA) is a self-administered tool to measure the negative and positive effects of helping others who are experiencing trauma.

[**HeartMath Institute’s Personal Well-Being Survey**](#) is a scientifically validated measurement of four dimensions of well-being, including stress management, adaptability, resilience, and emotional vitality.

[**Headspace**](#) is a subscription-based platform that offers science-backed meditation and mindfulness tools to nurture and support positive mental health habits.



Provet Cloud produced this eBook.
Visit provet.cloud to learn more.