Caring for carers: understanding emotional labour and supporting staff

Rosie Allister

This session looks at the evidence on the impact of companion animal euthanasia on veterinary staff wellbeing and mental health, and explores emotional and psychological consequences of the demands that can occur in veterinary work, including emotional work in supporting bereaved clients and the need to support one another as colleagues.

It explores how the human-animal bond and the relationships clients have with their animals can affect the work we do, and how our own values and beliefs can affect our wellbeing.

The session focuses on what helps, including practical tips to help support colleagues. It explores the concept of emotional labour — the work of managing emotions in dealings with customers or employees, and how compassionate effective line management can help, including practical steps managers can take to promote workplace wellbeing.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Review the evidence around veterinary mental health and wellbeing, including the types of

adversity that can impact veterinary mental health

- Understand the concept of emotional labour and what it means in veterinary practice
- Explore techniques for supporting staff in demanding roles

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following is an example of emotional labour?
 - (A) Maintaining a calm professional demeanour during a difficult euthanasia
 - (B) Making jokes at a staff party
 - (C) Letting off steam
 - (D) Learning about mental health topics
2. Does companion animal euthanasia have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of veterinary staff?
 - (A) Solely positive
 - (B) Solely negative
 - (C) We don't know
 - (D) Can be both positive and negative
3. What would be a warning sign for stress in a colleague?
 - (A) Talking to colleagues about difficult situations
 - (B) Scheduling holidays in advance
 - (C) Leaving on time
 - (D) Trouble concentrating

Compassion fatigue: what is it and how can you help?

Rosie Allister

This session looks at how to identify stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, moral distress or moral injury, and how and why it is important to differentiate them. We review evidence from the veterinary sector looking at veterinary-specific risks as well as factors present in many workplaces.

The session also addresses some areas of confusion in this field. Burnout is often misunderstood and attributed to individual characteristics, or described as a 'disease' affecting individuals, whereas it is important to understand it as a system-level issue with system-level solutions. We also consider confusion around compassion fatigue, and why it matters for veterinary professionals to understand factors affecting workplace health.

The session reviews what both workplaces and individuals can do if they identify concerns. It also looks at what can cause compassion fatigue, how to identify it and what can help to prevent it. It also takes a practical approach to what to do if you or a colleague experience it. Using scenario-based case studies, this session gives you a chance to identify and decide on steps for designing a practice plan for support and prevention.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Review the evidence around burnout, compassion fatigue and wellbeing
- Understand the concept of compassion fatigue and what it means in veterinary practice
- Explore ways to prevent or address compassion fatigue, at the workplace and individual level

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following are signs of burnout?
 - (A) Exhaustion, cynicism, ineffectiveness
 - (B) Depression

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- (C) Problems with eating
(D) Unwanted intrusive thoughts about a situation at work
2. What is compassion fatigue?
- (A) Not enough empathy
(B) Not enough exposure to difficult cases
(C) Never preventable
(D) Contributed to by secondary traumatic stress

3. Which of the following statements is UNTRUE?
- (A) Workplace support systems can reduce the risk of compassion fatigue
(B) Compassion fatigue is a sign of an excessively sensitive personality
(C) Distress at animal suffering is common among veterinary professionals
(D) Suppression of emotional responses does not prevent compassion fatigue

Building and supporting compassionate teams: what helps?

Rosie Allister

Veterinary professionals work hard to care for others, and that care needs to extend to ourselves and our colleagues. Over recent years, awareness of poor wellbeing, stress at work, burnout and other challenges facing veterinary mental health have increased. It is important that we match that increased awareness with evidence-based steps to improve and maintain mental health and wellbeing. There are things, at both organizational and individual level, that can help.

The session reviews what both workplaces and individuals can do if they identify concerns. It also looks at stress among veterinary professionals and things employers and individuals can do to help, with a particular focus on prevention rather than a reactive response.

We look at five take-away tips to maintain wellbeing, and at five essential employer and organizational actions to support staff and help to keep them safe.

For employers we look at:

- Valuing wellbeing and developing authentic plans to support it
- Compassionate line management and how positive supportive relationships help
- Effective teams and communication — how they can help prevent burnout
- Working conditions and what is important for mental health
- Understanding and preventing (rather than just reacting to) stress.

For individuals we look at:

- Taking control — understanding what you can and cannot control in workplace wellbeing
- Prioritizing wellbeing — the evidence base for what helps the most
- Connection and relationships in maintaining mental health
- Sleep and how to get it when working out-of-hours
- Challenging superhero culture.

Finally the session reviews the work of Vetlife in supporting the veterinary community. Vetlife receives around ten contacts a day from veterinary professionals needing support. Vetlife has three services:

- Vetlife Helpline, which offers confidential, non-judgmental emotional support to everyone in the UK veterinary community 24 hours a day by phone or email
- Vetlife Health Support, professional mental health support for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses referred through the Helpline
- Vetlife Financial Support, financial help for veterinary surgeons and their dependents impacted by health conditions or bereavement.

Vetlife can be contacted 24 hours a day on 0303 040 2551 or email via www.vetlife.org.uk.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Review the evidence around veterinary teams and mental health and wellbeing, particularly burnout
- Understand the concept of compassionate line management for wellbeing
- Explore techniques for early identification and prevention of veterinary mental health issues, and how supportive and compassionate line management can help

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following would be likely to help most in response to burnout?
- (A) Performance management
(B) Sending the individual staff member on a course about stress
(C) Review of systems and structural factors causing chronic stress for all staff in the workplace
(D) Disciplinary process
2. Who is susceptible to burnout in a veterinary team?
- (A) Veterinary surgeons
(B) Veterinary nurses
(C) Customer care staff
(D) All staff can be affected

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