Sustainable Futures for Veterinary Practice

Stress Management

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Introduction

In a general sense stress and its impact on our health and wellbeing has become a well recognised and documented fact of modern life. While “good stress” in the form of realistic and manageable challenges mobilises us to get our needs met and tackles life’s tasks, our lives have become more complicated and difficult to manage with increasing demands, uncertainty, and pressure on our time. More specifically, the veterinary profession, with its unique combination of intellectual, physical and emotional demands has a strong propensity towards causing chronic stress and burnout in those who work in it.¹

What Stress Is

Stress manifests as a complex of thoughts, emotions, physical symptoms and behaviours, which result in an unpleasant psychological and or physiological state. The experience of stress is subjective and arises from the complex relationship between a person and their environment. It therefore depends on a range of variables including potential environmental stressors, our subjective appraisal of them and our coping skills and resources.

It is essential to understand that our cognitive and emotional responses and reactions to the external events and circumstances of our lives play a major role in determining whether we feel stressed or not. In fact the way we process life in our inner world of thoughts and feelings can play a primary role in generating stress irrespective of external factors.³

Physiology

Our primitive physiological stress response is designed to enable us to protect ourselves in the face of an acute threat. It is adaptive, anabolic and essentially sympathetic adrenomedullary.⁴ The high level of autonomic arousal serves to provide us with the sensory hypersensitivity and physical capability to do whatever we need to protect ourselves – fight or flee. In either case there is a physical discharge of the tension that has been created in our body.

Nowadays we rarely have to deal with an acute threat to our survival. Rather we are subjected more to ongoing stress often with a multifactorial aetiology and a significant psychological component. Consequently our body can be kept in a state of hyper vigilance, alertness and tension for days, weeks or years. When chronically activated the physiological stress response becomes primarily pituitary adrenocortical and catabolic.⁴ It is this insidious shift
over time that creates the more serious physiological and metabolic disturbances of chronic stress.

**Stress in the Veterinary Profession**

Being a veterinarian has implicit within it unique and complex demands and, as in all the “helping” professions, stress and burnout are well recognised problems. Many factors in our work are beyond our control, there is a high level of responsibility, our work is often risky and precarious and, much as we would like to, we are unable to guarantee outcomes to clients who usually have a big emotional investment in their animals.

For decades now veterinarians have identified many sources of work-related stress including long hours of work, the difficulty of client relations, client expectations, performing euthanasia, being exposed to death and grief, coping with the consequences of mistakes – worst case death of a patient, difficult ethical decisions, conflict, lack of appreciation, developing surgical and medical competency for new graduates, the difficulties of practice management and litigation.

At a personal level we are expected to be available and give of ourselves to both our patients and clients in what are often demanding and emotionally charged predicaments. In a typical working day we have to:

- solve challenging and complex medical problems
- administer anaesthesia and perform surgical procedures
- convey important information accurately to our clients
- provide emotional support and guidance to our clients
- try to cultivate client satisfaction
- function in relationship with other staff
- perform euthanasia and be exposed to death and grief
- deal with an unpredictable and often precipitous workload

In summary we need to respond to the medical and surgical needs of our patients, the practical and emotional needs of our clients and handle our own responses and feelings to all of this.

In addition to this inherent predisposition towards stress in the nature of our work, certain personality traits further increase susceptibility to stress and burnout. These traits include self-reliance, exacting attention to detail, strong work ethic, dedication, high achievement and control of emotional expression. Paradoxically these traits have been associated commonly with successful professional people and have been strongly identified with a predisposition towards stress-related illness since the 1970’s.

Furthermore it has been recognised that there is a high incidence of so called “caretaking” behaviour in the helping professions. Characteristics of caretaking behaviour include a strong desire to please others, difficulty saying “no” and over commitment to accommodate the wishes of others. While this behaviour is in one sense noble and often an extension of our caring and compassionate nature, there is a risk that we can minimise or deny our own needs.
The good news is that once we develop the awareness of any patterns of behaviour that may be undermining our wellbeing we can learn new ways of relating and give some of that care and compassion back to ourselves.

**Symptoms of Stress**

Stress can manifest in a broad range of physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural symptoms. It is usual for there to be a combination of symptoms from different groups.

1. **Physical symptoms** include – headaches, chronic tiredness and fatigue, musculoskeletal aches and pains, hypertension, rapid heart rate, panic attacks, nausea, ulcers, diarrhoea, insomnia or poor quality sleep, lowered disease resistance – frequent infections, loss of libido – sexual dysfunction, sensitivity to light or sound.

2. **Emotional symptoms** include depression, apathy, anxiety and worry, fear, feelings of powerlessness and being overwhelmed, feeling trapped, frustrated, irritable or angry, loneliness, grief and feeling like crying a lot.

3. **Cognitive symptoms** include obsessive thinking, worry and anxiety, negative thinking, poor short term memory, difficulty concentrating, catastrophising, mind reading, black and white thinking – interpret things as all good or all bad, unable to see options, loss of balanced perspective.

4. **Behavioural symptoms** include expression of anger – hair trigger or passive, being angry with clients and patients, inability to make decisions, chronic complaining, shut down communication, procrastination, withdrawal from relationships, compulsive restlessness, lack of self care, the appearance of new compulsive behaviours – change in eating patterns, alcohol and caffeine consumption, gambling, other addictions.

In the practice, environment symptoms of stress include increased errors, lack of concentration, indecisiveness, increased work effort to try to stay on top, poor attitude to clients and other staff, absenteeism, staff turnover, increased sick leave, poor morale, gossip and criticism.

**Substance abuse**

Substance abuse is a very common reaction to feeling stressed and is worthy of special mention. The fundamental motivation informing substance abuse is a strong desire to alter our mood and change the way we feel. Substances used include alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy, amphetamines, tranquilisers and other recreational drugs. In a broader definition sugar, caffeine and food can also be used in a similar way to mood alter. Of particular concern to the veterinary profession is our ready access to drugs of addiction, prescription medications and anaesthetic agents.

While substance abuse is both tempting and understandable given the range, easy availability and choice of substances, “medicating” our stress and uncomfortable feelings is an unhealthy coping mechanism and a way of avoiding dealing constructively with core issues. At best, more stress results. At worst there is great danger that substance abuse can become habit
forming, create dependency or, depending on the substance, lead to addiction. There exists
great potential for serious longer term psychological and physical health consequences.

**Burnout**

Burnout develops over years and represents the end stage of chronic stress. It is characterised
by physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion. Symptoms include progressive loss of
energy and motivation, physical exhaustion, chronic tiredness and fatigue, loss of purpose, no
sense of fun at all and non-restorative sleep. Individuals suffering from burnout often desire
change but feel drained and overwhelmed, powerless, trapped, hopeless and helpless and
often profound grief at their own circumstance. At a spiritual level individuals begin to doubt
their self worth, life purpose and direction.

In a practice setting, burnout may manifest as compassion fatigue, a lack of caring for clients
and patients, cynicism and anger at staff and clients alike, negative attitude, loss of
enthusiasm and diligence, lack of patient care and a decline in practice standards.

**Stress Management**

The cornerstone of good stress management is to work towards living life in balance
emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. To that end it is necessary to develop both a
practice of preventative measures and the skills to respond to stressors in a constructive and
positive way. The real skill in managing veterinary life and enjoying the rich rewards it offers
is to be aware of and honour our own needs while simultaneously meeting those of our clients
and patients.

Stress symptoms are warning signs that tell us something needs to change. The initial step in
managing stress is to develop the self-awareness to be sensitive to our “inner climate” – our
somatic symptoms and other manifestations of stress. On an individual basis we need to take
inventory to understand what our main stressors are and what our early warning signs of
stress are. It is equally important to couple this awareness with a proactive attitude to taking
remedial measures based on healthy coping strategies.

Having developed an understanding of your triggers and reactions to stress, the next step is to
look at what you can change or influence and what you can’t. For example it may be possible
to restructure workload through delegation, resolve or improve a chronic health issue, work
towards resolution of an interpersonal conflict or develop skills to achieve mastery over a
previously troublesome area e.g. dealing with grieving clients.

When confronted with factors that cannot be changed it is possible to learn new ways of
responding which will allow a more serene existence. Learning to challenge negative
thoughts and mentally reframe situations is an essential component of stress management.
Following are ten fundamental themes and practices from which you can create a program of self care, identify healthy coping strategies for difficult times and identify areas where you may need to acquire or develop skills.

(1) Take time out every day
It is essential to prioritise quiet time for yourself in every day. This should be at least 45 minutes when there are no demands, responsibilities or duties. Time out does not include watching television, reading talking with someone or being involved in any activity that will make demands on your energy. It is time for rest, relaxation and reflection. Time in nature is particularly good if manageable. Take regular breaks during work – at least 5 minutes every hour when possible. Block off the occasional appointment when you are feeling pressured or in times of peak demand.

(2) Reduce workload to a reasonable level
Overwork is a real trap for veterinarians as traditionally there has been an entrenched practice of working very long hours. You simply cannot avoid stress if you are working too much. Even if you feel physically and psychologically well, other areas of your life will be compromised due to a lack of available time. It is highly desirable if not essential to, as much as is possible, have clearly defined boundaries around working hours. Based on my experience in counselling and mentoring both veterinarians and members of the wider community, working more than 40 hours a week is problematic for people prone to stress.

(3) Practice meditation / yoga / relaxation daily
Meditation is becoming increasingly embraced by mainstream medicine and western culture for its proven positive effect on physical and mental health. Aside from the physiological effect of reducing sympathetic nervous system activity, it allows us to centre ourselves by temporarily detaching from the busyness of life and the busyness of our mind. It is one of the most powerful tools available for the management of stress. Meditation is best done at least once daily for 10 – 15 minutes - after waking but before eating in the morning is an excellent time. It is equally useful at the other end of the day to detach from the days activity. For those who find meditation too difficult other relaxation techniques can be equally effective. Yoga is also an excellent practice for developing a relaxation response. Whatever you use make it a regular practice.

(4) Diet
It is common through the nature of our work to skip meals, have irregular meals and seek quick energy from caffeine, sugar and junk foods high in carbohydrates and fat. It is easy for this to become an established pattern in the clinic environment due to the unpredictability of the workload. If this becomes an established pattern then you are putting your body under ongoing nutritional stress. It is vital to have three balanced meals at roughly the same time daily. Also look at what you are eating – over the last four decades our society has increasingly been consuming a diet of refined and processed foods which do not provide optimal nutrition.

(5) Exercise
The beneficial effects of exercise are well documented including mood shift from endorphin release, improved cardiovascular health, enhanced immune function, release of pent up physical tension and others. Exercise 3 - 4 times weekly appropriately for how you feel – listen to your body. If you are feeling rundown and tired, as is commonly the case with chronic stress, it is counterproductive to push yourself hard with exercise. Your exercise
regime needs to be graded to how you feel and your energy reserves. If you are in burnout it may only be a gentle walk or swim, or nothing at all some days.

(6) **Communicate rather than medicate**
Debrief with someone appropriate when feeling stressed. Ideally this needs to be an objective non-judgemental third party who you feel comfortable with and trust. It can make a huge difference to ventilate your pent up feelings around any stressful issue or circumstance. There is clear evidence that having strong social support networks has a high protective effect against stress.\(^8\) When you are struggling make an outreach call. Seek out a mentor or support “buddy” to debrief with and look at setting up mentoring and support networks.

If you recognise you have an unhealthy pattern of medicating your stress seek support too. Seek professional support via helplines, support groups, your general practitioner, counsellors or any relevant body if you are experiencing ongoing difficulties of any nature, especially addictions or substance abuse problems.

It can be extremely difficult for some of us to seek assistance with personal difficulties usually due to a perception that to need help is a sign of weakness. This applies particularly to men and to the type of person who has the personality traits previously discussed – resilient, self reliant, emotionally contained, dedicated and a high achiever. It is vital to allow ourselves to be human and come to an understanding that it is not only OK but in fact the healthiest option to seek help and support when we are struggling.

(7) **Time management**
Time management is being covered elsewhere in the conference proceedings. Learn to prioritise and put first your own essential needs such as time out, relaxation, meal times and exercise. You must prioritise and protect your fundamental structure for self care. Learn the skill of setting boundaries with others by saying “no” to avoid overextending yourself. In the workplace look at what you can delegate and take time away from the practice during quiet times. If you know you have a busy day ahead, block out a consultation or two to give yourself some space and reduce the pressure.

(8) **Include activities that are fun**
An essential part of stress management is to include replenishing activities that make you feel good – film, music, time in nature, exploring, bushwalking, sailing, meeting for coffee, going for a walk. Go through the exercise of writing down a list of all the activities that you really enjoy and include some of them on a weekly basis.

(9) **Challenge your negative thoughts**
We all have an inner dialogue of self talk in the thoughts we have – the way we think has a powerful bearing on the way we feel. We can learn to monitor and challenge negative thoughts and beliefs that may arise in response to life events or circumstances.\(^3\) Our ability to “imagine the future” and consequently worry about things that have not happened, may not happen and that we often have no influence over is a major source of stress. Learning to detach our thinking from past and future events and from what is out of our control is a skill strongly supported by meditation.

(10) **Learn effective communication**
Learn to be assertive (as opposed to passive or aggressive) in order to be able to speak up for yourself, resolve conflict, disagree healthily when you need to, foster healthier relationships
and get your needs met. Veterinarians commonly identify communication difficulties with clients as a major stressor.

**Beware** of the HALTS = Hungry Angry Lonely Tired

When you are in any of these states you need to centre yourself by addressing the underlying need. i.e. healthy food, find a way to process your anger without harming others, outreach and connect, rest.

**Conclusion**

For most of us in the modern world managing stress is a daily challenge. The overall goal is to use the ideas, skills and techniques listed above to give your life a reasonably balanced structure on a daily basis. Ideally, in every day there should be time for proper relaxed eating and digestion, work, time out, meditation/relaxation, exercise (every other day) and some connection with loved ones. To live the ideal can be challenging but I strongly recommend you draw up a weekly action plan and set in place all that you need to live your life in balance. By developing a solid practice of self care you will “stress proof” yourself to a degree. During difficult times it becomes harder to maintain good self care but that is precisely when you need it most. Reduce all demands that you realistically can, debrief with what support you have around you and make sure you take time out.

**Remember - if nothing changes then nothing changes**
References


