

area. The *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education (JVME)* published a themed issue exploring the topic of mental health and well-being among veterinary students and graduates. The last similarly themed edition was released in 2005, and, in the intervening time, we have seen a changing direction of the research effort. The editors of the special edition, Susan Rhind and Andrew Grant, described this as a transition from “studying the rain” to “studying the umbrella”.

They said: “While, for obvious reasons, much of the published research in the area of mental health and well-being focuses on reporting the problem and reducing stressors (the rain), an alternative approach is to focus on how we can build resilience and nurture well-being (the umbrella) – that is, how can we develop better umbrellas and help students protect themselves from the rain?”¹

Bounce back from adversity

A keyword in the previous statement is “resilience”, which is a central theme both within this edition of the *JVME* and the broader mental health and well-being literature.

In this context, resilience can be described as the ability of an individual to “bounce back”, or even thrive, in the face of stress or adversity. The concept of resilience has been embraced by our profession and was added to the RCVS Day One Competences²: “Veterinary surgeons need to be resilient and confident in their own professional judgements to withstand the stresses and conflicting demands they may face in the workplace.”

Researchers in this area³ have said a focus on topics such as resilience, which are grounded in a positive psychology approach, help us to “balance discussions of mental health risk against the potential for fulfilling and self-actualising experiences in veterinary work”. In other words, if we concentrate more on why veterinary staff thrive and find enjoyment in their careers, we can learn to build some fine umbrellas.

Key factors for resilience

Within the *JVME* paper, we see unique insights into resilience and how it fits within the veterinary profession. Martin Cake and colleagues³ outlined a number of themes they consider key factors in veterinary resilience. These are explored now, alongside how they might relate to the experiences of an individual veterinary staff member:

- Emotional competence: can you recognise and work effectively with your emotions and those of others, such as clients and colleagues? Would you say you had skills of “emotional intelligence”? How do you cope during and after an emotionally charged work situation?
- Motivation: do you find meaning in what you do day to day? Does your veterinary work link with an overall sense of purpose in your life? In your current role, are there many incidents

- or situations that clash with this sense of purpose?
- Personal resources: what skills or “tools” do you feel you have access to if you want to make a positive change in your life? How likely is it you can show proactive, assertive, optimistic behaviour when needed? What personal resources have you harnessed effectively to get to where you are today?
 - Social support: what does your support network look like? Does it have components that are emotional (being heard and feeling understood by someone non-judgemental) and tangible (having practical assistance, such as someone to feed your pets or pick up children at short notice)? How much of your social support is face to face and how much is online? Overall, psychology literature suggests face-to-face relationships have richer, more positive benefits for our mental well-being.
 - Organisational culture: what support is available in work – do you feel you have the mentorship and access to professional development you need? Do you feel you can grow and be “authentic” in your role? How much independence or autonomy do you feel that you have within your clinical work?
 - Life balance: the authors used this term in preference to “work-life balance” as, they explained, “work can and should be an enjoyable and rewarding part of living”³. Are you happy with how you manage your time? Are you comfortable with boundary setting in the workplace, such as saying “no” when necessary? Do you have sufficient down time to recuperate between shifts of work?
 - Well-being strategies: what “tools” or exercises do you call on to increase your own sense of well-being and accentuate your coping skills? Examples of these might include mindfulness exercises, meditations, cognitive restructuring techniques and gratitude diaries⁴. Can you recognise if these strategies are working for you?

Intrinsic and extrinsic components

What the paper does really well is to outline both the intrinsic (related to the individual) and extrinsic (related to the environment where the individual operates) components of resilience.

Good evidence exists that we can develop skills such as emotion management and expand our range of skills for coping with stress. However, these skills will be ineffective if we are working in an environment that does not allow us to develop a resilient approach, such as due to a dysfunctional organisational structure or one that impedes our ability to develop our all-important social support. This idea was highlighted at a Mind Matters research symposium held at The University of Edinburgh.

Debbie Cohen, a professor at the Cardiff University Centre for Psychosocial Research, reported veterinary clinic staff should view a pattern of burnout as an issue of the workplace, not the individual.

According to Cohen, as reported by BVA past-president Robin Hargreaves: “The message to

practitioners is: if staff are reporting or showing signs of burnout you should look to your systems of working to change the drivers rather than try to increase coping and resilience.”⁵

When we look at veterinary medicine through the prism of clinical work, many challenges exist that could be classified as unchangeable or intractable, such as our exposure to difficult client encounters, the risks of being physically injured and dealing with emergency cases. But, in some cases, poor practice and people management, such as badly managed staff feedback and mentoring, rota issues and staff shortages, can add unnecessary occupational stress.

As a veterinary coach and resilience trainer, the author cautions resilience training in these situations could – in theory – be used to “victim-blame”⁶. You can almost hear the frustrated cry of staff managers: “Well, we gave you lot the training, why aren’t things getting any better?” When selecting an effective resilience-building course, it is important to choose one that allows veterinary staff to identify if their main challenges to resilience stem from intrinsic or extrinsic sources⁷.

To explain this in terms of the “rain and umbrella” analogy, resilience should not just be about ensuring we have a strong umbrella: we should be also prepared to look outwards and to check, indeed, we are standing in the rain, and not – as can happen – under a waterfall.

References

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