

Emotional Competence

For the purposes of the VetSet2Go project, emotional competence was defined as the **capacity to navigate** emotional situations and **self-regulate** emotional responses. It was also taken to imply the ability to **recognize and respond constructively** to the emotions of others, an essential precursor for **empathy**.

The importance of emotional competence emerged strongly in the VetSet2Go project. Since emotions are ever-present in the veterinary environment, employers look for veterinarians who can readily navigate emotional situations.

This is something that can be particularly challenging for new graduates. But the same emotional hazards can challenge the **resilience** of even the most experienced vets.

Emotional competence is a subset of the broader construct of **emotional intelligence**, often described as one of the key factors contributing to success in the workplace. Emotional competence can be divided into four categories^{1,2}: **self-awareness**, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Mayer and Salovey provide a definition of emotional intelligence³:

Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional meanings, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote both better emotion and thought.

In any profession – as more generally in life – emotional competence and the broader suite of emotional intelligence are the foundation of **successful relationships** and **interpersonal communication**. This applies particularly in complex healthcare environments.

What they said

*“Another thing I was looking for was someone who’s emotionally stable ... Do they seem like they’re really up and down all the time, or are they emotionally distraught about very basic things, or do they sort of **take that in their stride** generally? Do they have a **life outside of work?**” (Employer)*

*“Learning [...] why you feel the way that you feel about what’s happened, and if you’ve had a good day **how to channel that**, and if you’ve had a bad day **how to learn from it** and not just sort of put it away and pretend it never happened.” (Recent graduate)*

*“I have twice had a cat who had to be put to sleep and the vets concerned wept with me. I will never forget those vets and the **compassion and empathy** they demonstrated, but would have concerns about their **mental health** if that happened often.” (Client)*

How is emotional competence recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are comfortable dealing with emotions, both in yourself and in others
- You feel confident dealing with emotionally-challenging situations
- You understand and can manage your own emotional triggers
- You can remain calm, civil and respectful during difficult situations

Perceived by others:

- ‘Emotionally intelligent’, excellent ‘people skills’
- Able to ‘read’ a situation and other people
- Calm and stable in emotional situations
- Can manage emotionally-difficult encounters and diffuse disputes

The VetSet2Go project found that new graduate veterinarians harness their emotional intelligence to navigate the challenges they faced in veterinary practice, including finding a starting position, responding to stressful events, building relationships with clients and colleagues, and communicating effectively.

Why is emotional competence important to employability?

Personal and professional success depends not only on your knowledge and practical abilities, but also on how you manage yourself and interact with others. Many veterinary employers rank **interpersonal abilities** higher than knowledge and technical skills when hiring new graduates.^{4,5} Once employed, emotional competence can help you navigate challenges in transition to practice, strengthen your relationships with clients and colleagues, and become a leader in your work.⁶ Emotional competence can build your **self-confidence and identity**, draw on your **motivation** for being a vet, take advantage of **collaboration and teamwork** to set and achieve rewarding goals, build **empathy and respect** with clients and colleagues, and assist you to provide **relationship-centered care** and engage in **effective communication**. All of these areas need you to be 'in touch' with your emotions and the emotions of others. Improving your emotional competence in these areas will likely improve your personal and professional success.

"[Employability is] the ability to communicate well, act professionally, and balance your emotions." (Employer)

*"I try and **keep my head** ... you don't want to blow your head, otherwise you end up saying things you'll regret." (Recent graduate)*

"Yes, professionalism is important, but too much can make a vet come across as cold and unfeeling. A calm vet is good, but showing emotions to me is not the sign of an unprofessional vet." (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your emotional competence

Learn what your emotions are telling you:

Feelings contain data about ourselves and how we are experiencing the world around us. Understanding what stimuli cause each emotion can give you insight to enact positive change.

Analyse your habitual responses:

The ability to identify patterns in your thoughts, feelings and actions forms a key part of recognising the impact of emotions. These patterns become unconscious 'filters' for how we interpret the world. Querying them can ensure we are acting appropriately.

Identify your values:

Your values represent what you believe is of greatest importance in life. Identifying your top ten values can help you to act in alignment with them. This will contribute to your work satisfaction and success.

Use consequential thinking:

Consequential thinking is about evaluating the likely short and long term consequences of choices before action is

taken – both good and bad. To do this effectively, it is important to consider not only the strategic implications, but also the emotional implications.

Learn to navigate your emotions:

Access the meaning and energy in feelings by feeling them rather than suppressing them, letting them flow smoothly rather than becoming stuck in one emotion, and expressing them in a way that is gentle rather than forceful.⁶

Develop your organizational awareness:

Organisational awareness is the ability to sense the underlying cultures, values and unspoken rules of your workplace. Identifying social networks and power relationships can help you to create effective decision networks and manage organisational politics.

Work and life experience:

Emotional competence skills are used in most social situations, so these can be developed through life experience and many kinds of work, including voluntary.

Further Resources:

- Timmins, R.P. (2006) How does emotional intelligence fit into the paradigm of veterinary medical education? *JVME* 33: 71-75
- Stobbs, C. (2003) Emotional intelligence: how important is a high 'EQ'? *In Practice* 25: 506-507

References:

1. Goleman, D. (1998) *Working with emotional intelligence*, Bloomsbury: London.
2. Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A. (2002) *Primal leadership: Realising the power of emotional intelligence*. Harvard Press: Boston.
3. Mayer, J.D. & Salovey, P. (1997) 'What is emotional intelligence', *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications*, eds. P. Salovey & D. Sluyter, Basic Books: New York, 3-31.
4. Heath, T.J. & Mills, J.N. (1999) 'Starting work in veterinary practice: An employer's viewpoint', *Australian Veterinary Practitioner*, 29(4): 146-152.
5. Heath, T.J. & Mills, J.N. (2000) 'Criteria used by employers to select new graduate employees', *Australian Vet. Journal*, 78(5): 312-316.
6. Freedman, J. (2007) *At the heart of leadership: How to get results with emotional intelligence*, Six Seconds: San Mateo, California.