

Relationship-centred Care

Relationship-centred care is a **clinical philosophy** that stresses partnership, careful attention to relational process, shared decision-making and self-awareness.¹

It has its origins in human healthcare, which emphasizes the importance of relationships between patients and clinicians, within healthcare teams, with the community, and of the clinician with themselves. These **relationships form the basis of all decisions** concerning a patient's care.

In the veterinary context, relationship-centred care is about involving the client in a shared decision-making process, taking into account their perspectives and the human-animal bond, in order to produce the optimal outcomes for the animal and build a trusting and long-lasting relationship that facilitates care. **Effective communication, empathy and respect**, and **trust** are central components to relationship-centred approaches.

Relationship-centred care contrasts with a more traditional approach to case management, where the veterinarian was seen as a paternalistic figure who instructed the client on what to do and expected compliance with minimal explanation. By **respecting client perspectives, and involving them** in all aspects of decisions around their animal's care, veterinarians build trust and understanding with their clients, which will be helpful in more challenging situations.

What they said

*"I want to know that my vet is **listening to my concerns** and is able to explain treatment options in a way I can understand (without being too simplistic) so I can make an informed decision." (Client)*

"The two-way conversation is extremely important to me. I live with my dog. I see him every day. I know what is normal for him and what is not. I notice changes. Changes in day-to-day routine can be indicators of certain things, so I think it would be ridiculous for a vet to dismiss an owner's observations or to neglect asking questions [...] the partnership feeling is very important — part of maintaining that is good communication." (Client)

*"[New graduates] get all their experience at a high-performing university and a specialist clinic and it doesn't always reflect life in a general practice ... So I guess **being aware that the ideal treatment isn't always the best** for that pet, because it's not what the client wants or can afford." (Employer)*

How is relationship-centred care recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You feel like you and the client are a team, working together for the best outcome
- You work to build rapport and trust with clients
- You are good at social chat or 'small talk' as well as clinical communication
- You are sensitive to people's differences and can tailor your communication accordingly

Perceived by others:

- Approaches animal care as a joint venture with the client
- Good 'people skills' for building effective, trusting relationships
- Clients feel that you value their perspectives as a partnership, and genuinely care about them and their animal(s)
- Sensitive and responsive to client differences
- Presents all options and works with a client to find the best choice under the circumstances

Why is relationship-centred care important to employability?

The notion of relationship-centred care emerged strongly in the VetSet2Go project, with both clients and veterinarians reporting that joint decision-making was essential for good relationships and **trustworthiness**.

Veterinarians who can build these relationships are more likely to retain clients, which is good for the animals, good for the practice, and good for the veterinarian themselves.

This ability to build relationships helps with many other aspects of employability from a personal perspective – **motivation, sustainable engagement and resilience**.

Relationship-centred care is also more efficient than the traditional approach to case management in that it allows for more accurate data gathering, more patient satisfaction, more physician satisfaction, and more adherence, ultimately resulting in better health outcomes and reducing malpractice risk.

*"[...] emotional intelligence and the ability to read a situation and read other people [...] and the ability, I guess, to **read what people want** and where they're coming from, and what constraints they may have on what they're able to do or not do, and what their ultimate aim is."*
(Employer)

*"I like to know up-front the cost of treatment options or surgery, so that I can make a decision with advice from the vet about what is going to **give my pet the best outcome**, and what we can afford at the time. I was really impressed with my vet with the planning, advice and emails detailing all costs (which were itemised) when our dog was admitted for day surgery recently."*
(Client)

*"I think having a strong and positive client relationship is very important to ensure that you 'trust' your vet and **aren't second-guessing their decision**. If there wasn't a strong relationship, and the vet's decision was 'debatable' for the client (myself), I would consider getting a second opinion, almost deeming the initial consult invalid."*
(Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your relationship-centred care

Improve your communication skills:

This is the foundation of relationship-centred care – without effective communication skills, you cannot build relationships with clients.

Appreciate your client's perspectives:

Be genuinely interested in your client's perspectives and work to build a relationship with them, through exploring their ideas, concerns and expectations.

Demonstrate empathy:

Consider your client's emotions and communicate this verbally and non-verbally.

Consider practicalities:

Try to understand the specific situation of each client and whether this will impact on the joint decision-making that you undertake.

Continuity of care:

Ensure that you personally follow-up on clients, and ensure good communication habits within the practice team to facilitate a feeling of continuity.

Consider all options:

Don't forget that what might work for one client may not work for another when making decisions about their animals. Ensure you consider all of the options, all of the time.

Be alert to exceptions:

Not all clients expect relationship-centred, collaborative approaches to care — some may prefer to trust the veterinarian to make decisions on their behalf. However, it is still important to explain your rationale for choosing a particular treatment option.

Further Resources:

- Adams, C.L. & Frankel, R.M. (2007) It may be a dog's life but the relationship with her owners is also key to her health and wellbeing: communication in veterinary medicine. *The Veterinary Clinics of North America. Small Animal Practice*. 37(1): 1-17
- Adams, C.L. & Kurtz, S. (2017) *Skills for Communicating in Veterinary Medicine*. Oxford, UK: Otmoor Publishing
- Gray, C. & Moffett, J. (2010) *Handbook of Veterinary Communication Skills*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell
- Kurtz, S. (2006) Teaching and Learning Communication in Veterinary Medicine. *JVME*. 33:11

References:

1. Suchman, A.L. (2006) A new theoretical foundation for relationship-centered care. *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 21(S1): S40-44