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# Supporting RVNs with eating disorders

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**ABSTRACT:** Eating disorders are a group of serious mental illnesses that may be affecting a member of the veterinary nursing team. Employees with eating disorders often present little difficulty at work, but often require support from colleagues, line managers and HR. The support each individual will require or want will vary, but includes organising regular meetings; providing flexible working arrangements and modifying communication techniques.

Keywords: eating disorder; support; management

## Introduction

Veterinary nursing is a rewarding and fulfilling profession, but there are associated difficulties and struggles. Veterinary nurses are often exposed to traumatic situations such as euthanasia, making them at risk of various psychological conditions. Compassion fatigue, occupational stress and burn out have been documented frequently in veterinary nursing literature (Foster & Maples, 2014; Huggard & Huggard, 2008). Those suffering from the strain and stress may be more likely to rely on negative coping mechanisms (Brannick et al., 2015). The author used her eating disorder as a coping mechanism throughout her early twenties. Having suffered with anorexia nervosa whilst working in practice, the author hopes to share tips and advice on how to support veterinary nurses in practice living with an eating disorder.

## What is an eating disorder?

Recent research showed that up to 7.8% of adults in England suffered from an eating disorder (NICE, 2017). It is estimated that 10% of UK veterinary students suffer from eating disorders (Vetlife, 2020). There are currently no statistics on the prevalence in the veterinary nursing profession. However, anyone can develop an

eating disorder, regardless of age, gender and background (ENEI, 2018). Recent evidence suggests that the cause is a combination of biological predisposition and a social or environmental trigger, such as stress or bereavement (BEAT, 2020).

Eating disorder is a generalised term for conditions including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder; avoidant/ restrictive feeding or eating disorder. General signs can be found in Table 1. Although a person's appearance may change at some point, it is often their behaviour and mood that changes first (BEAT, 2020).

Employees with eating disorders, often present little difficulty at work and excel within their roles (BEAT, 2020). However, many will strive to prevent their employees finding out about their illness, perhaps due to the stigma attached. A study conducted by BEAT in 2016 revealed that 30% of people felt stigmatised or discriminated against at work because of their eating disorder. 66% of people were unable to access support for their eating disorder at work, and a further 38% of people were forced to use annual leave to attend treatment for their eating disorder (BEAT, 2016).

## Colleagues

Colleagues are often the first to notice changes in their peer's behaviour. Employees who express concern about another employee, should be encouraged to contact line managers or HR directly to maintain a professional and respectful atmosphere in work. Whilst it may be inappropriate for a colleague to approach a peer directly, there are many discreet ways to support someone.

**Table 1.** Generalised signs associated with all eating disorders (Beat, 2017).

Preoccupation with and/or secretive behaviour around food	Difficulty focusing / concentrating
Self-consciousness when eating in front of others	Social withdrawal
Low self esteem	Tiredness
Irritability	Mood swings

The simplest method is listening to the person if they choose to open up to you. If you are close to the person, you may find that their eating disorder causes them to withdraw, but keep asking them to join in social events and activities. In a predominantly female environment such as the veterinary nursing profession, diet culture including body shape and food intake is often a common topic of conversation. This can be difficult for people with an eating disorder to deal with. Having an awareness of colleagues struggles, can help prevent uncomfortable and upsetting conversations.

## Line managers and HR

If you are concerned about a colleague, it can be difficult to raise the issue. You may worry that you will say the wrong thing, or that it is none of your business. However, eating disorders are a serious mental illness and the sooner treatment is initiated, the greater the chance of full and sustained recovery (BEAT, 2020). If the employee's work performance is affected, a line manager or HR should speak to the employee. It can be a difficult conversation, but below are examples of how you can help.

- Think of what you want to say first and empower yourself with information. Remember that only a medical professional can diagnose an eating disorder. BEAT and VetLife have a plentiful supply of educational and support materials online, including handouts you can print and have alongside you.
- Choose a safe, quiet and private place to speak to the colleague. Choose an appropriate time, preferably not around meal times. The author's line manager arranged meetings for the beginning of the shift, to avoid anxiety and distractions beforehand.
- Think about what language you use. Avoid being accusatory with statements such as 'you have an eating disorder'. Avoid the sole focus of the conversation being on sensitive topics such as food or the person's bodyweight. Instead, a work-based approach to a problem is often more successful. Demonstrate support and understanding, highlighting concerns about work performance whilst encouraging the employee to speak openly.
- They may be upset and defensive, but do not be disheartened by this. Anorexia is egosyntonic in nature, where sufferers value their disorder and this hinders their motivation for recovery (Gregertsen et al., 2017). Keep an eye on them, offer your

continued support and check-up on them again at a later date.

- The line manager should try to develop an open communication between themselves and the employee. A dialogue which focuses on restoring confidence and a sense of purpose will be more valued, than one emphasising food and weight.

## Ongoing support

The treatment for eating disorders may require lengthy treatments, which result in absence to attend appointments. Each individual's treatment plan will differ, with appointments being weekly, fortnightly or monthly. There are likely to be many barriers to treatment and employers should seek to ensure that work is not one of them. Employers have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments at work for employees who have disclosed mental health problems under the Equality Act 2010 (BEAT, 2016). Small and inexpensive changes can be valuable to the employee. Examples include:

- Facilitate flexible working for appointments. This can be done by allowing shift swaps; altering start and finish time and providing the opportunity to make up time lost for appointments. The author worked the late shift (12–9pm) every Thursday and attended appointments in the morning.
- Many people suffering with an eating disorder prefer routine. Consider arranging set lunch breaks when possible, to encourage the opportunity for regular nourishment.
- The staff break room can be an overwhelming and intimidating place to eat. Offering a separate meeting room or office to be used for lunch breaks may be helpful.
- Once the illness is out in the open, take time to check in and follow up. The author's line manager arranged regular meetings at a set time, allowing a support system to be created. If the employee does not already have them, creating clearly outlined job roles and responsibilities can help to overcome any performance issues that arise due to the illness. For many, having manageable workload and achievable targets can be a focus and aim.
- The author's practice has nominated Mental Health First Aiders, who have undertaken the Mind Matters Course. The first aiders aim to provide help and assistance to those who need it, whilst creating a practice ethos to be understanding, supportive and caring.

## Conclusion

Above all, it is important to note that people with eating disorders do not choose to have them (BEAT, 2020). Although statistics show that many sufferers feel unsupported by their employers, there are numerous ways in which support can be offered. The author highly recommends utilising the online resources and helplines provided by organisations such as BEAT, VetLife and Mind, who are designed to help and support those with an eating disorder and their support system.

The author would like to thank everyone at Paragon Veterinary Referrals for their continued and valued support, particularly HR and her line managers. Although eating disorders are a serious mental illness, they do not have to impact the work of the amazing individuals who have them. The author studied for her Certificate in Emergency and Critical Care, received a promotion in work and conducted research to be published whilst receiving treatment. She hopes that this article will inspire and assist those with eating disorders to seek the help they deserve in practice.

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