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# Managing stress in the workplace

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**ABSTRACT:** Mental health affects everyone from everyday worries to long-term conditions. Work specific stress can lead to poor performance and affect colleagues so it is beneficial to be able to recognise the symptoms in others. It is important not to suffer in silence, whether that is talking to friends or professionals. There are numerous resources available to help identify stress and give hints on how to implement changes in our lives to manage challenges that may arise.

**Keywords:** stress; managing stress; mental health

## Introduction

Having a good mental health is important to everyone. Mental health problems range from the worries all experience as part of everyday life to serious long-term conditions. The majority of people who experience mental health problems can get over them or learn to live with them if they get help early on.

Research by Mind confirms that a culture of fear and silence around mental health is costly to employers –

“More than one in five (21%) agreed that they had called in sick to avoid work when asked how workplace stress had affected them. 14% agreed that they had resigned and 42% had considered resigning when asked how workplace stress had affected them. 30% of staff disagreed with the statement ‘I would feel able to talk openly with my line manager if I was feeling stressed’. 56% of employers said that they would like to do more to improve staff wellbeing but don’t feel they have the right training or guidance.” (Mind, n.d.)

Work-related stress needs to be addressed to protect colleagues from the physical and psychological issues that comes with it. It can lead to poor work performance, increase in absence and an increase in employee turnover which clearly demonstrates the ethical and business reasons for tackling work stress (RCVS, 2015).

An RCVS survey of Veterinary Surgeons found that almost 90% reported that veterinary work was stressful (Buzzeo, et al., 2014). Although the survey was based on veterinary surgeons, veterinary nursing has been identified as an occupation at risk for

occupational stress and burnout, a better understanding of job stressors and influencing factors is needed.

## What is stress?

Stress can be defined as the physical, mental and emotional reaction experienced as a result of changes and demands in life. It is a term which is used to describe how people feel when faced with situations they find difficult to cope with or the feeling of losing control over something and sometimes there are no obvious signs (Mind, n.d.).

Stress is a natural part of life and most people feel stressed at some point; some can even find stress helpful or motivating (NHS, n.d.). Stress is the way the body protects us. When the body is working properly, the stress response helps people to stay focussed, energetic and alert, it is what keeps people on their toes at work and drives some to meet deadlines.

Even for those who normally enjoy work, their job may have its difficulties or less pleasant experiences. Stress will occur when the person feels that work demands exceed their capacity to deal with the situation.

## Possible causes of stress

The situations and pressure that cause stress are known as stressors. Stressors can be both negative and positive. What causes stress depends on the individual’s perception, something that can be stressful to one person may seem trivial to another. Although these situations can vary from person to person, there

are some life occurrences that are known to be common sources of stress (Table 1).

## How stress affects individuals

Although stress is a common word, many people do not understand the long-term implications of stress.

When people are under stress, their memory suffers; it can cause irritability and nervousness while constant stress can trigger physical conditions such as high blood pressure. Stress can greatly affect a person's quality of life in the long-term and can affect their ability to complete daily tasks. Excessive stress can have behavioural, emotional, mental and physical effects on a person (Table 2).

## Why and how stress can be managed and handled

Stress is not an illness but it can cause a serious illness if left unchecked. Recognising the signs and symptoms of stress early on can help an individual to figure out healthy coping mechanisms. Spotting the early signs will also help prevent it from getting worse and causing serious health complications and difficulties in the work environment.

## Steps to tackle/help with stress –

1. Develop an understanding of the cause and not ignoring the physical warnings.
2. Assess work/life balance, everyone needs 'me' time or 'family time' because that is what makes people happy.
3. Exercise can be very effective in relieving the stress. Endorphins that the body releases when exercising and the fresh air will be of benefit too.
4. Relaxation, is only something an individual can learn in their own way.
5. Lifestyle changes can be made once the immediate cause of stress has been managed. Try not to take on too much, delegate and prioritise tasks.
6. Try to get enough sleep to enable the body to recover after a busy day.
7. Know personal limits; remember there is only so much that can be done in a day.
8. Be mindful.

## Support that is available

If people are feeling stressed it is important that they do not feel afraid or embarrassed to seek professional help, especially if they are feeling overwhelmed. The first professional to approach is the

MIND	<a href="http://www.mind.org.uk">www.mind.org.uk</a>
Rethink	<a href="http://www.rethink.org">www.rethink.org</a>
Stress Management Society	<a href="http://www.stress.org.uk">www.stress.org.uk</a>
Vetlife	<a href="http://www.vetlife.org.uk">www.vetlife.org.uk</a>
RCVS Mind Matters Initiative	<a href="http://www.vetmindmatters.org">www.vetmindmatters.org</a>

Figure 1. Resources to help with mental health.

GP who will be able to signpost to the most appropriate management method e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or mindfulness.

As well as medical help, there are a number of organisations which can help tackle the cause of stress and how to manage it.

The Health and Safety Executive website ([www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)) contains a lot of information for managing stress at work. Other organisations that can help are found in Figure 1.

## Conclusion

Stress is an unfortunate reality for many veterinary nurses. Learning to recognise the symptoms of stress and developing ways to manage it is critical to enjoying the role. By seeking help from friends, family and professionals, stress can be managed and overcome enabling a renewed enthusiasm for the veterinary nursing role.

Do not feel afraid or alone, seek help or give help/support to others experiencing stress.

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Table 1. Common sources of stress.

Home Life	demands placed by children, partners, parents and siblings can become overwhelming.
Life Changes	marriage, pregnancy, divorce and death are some of the most common major life events that can be extremely stressful.
Money	financial worries are commonplace for many people. The strain of the cost of living with a limited income can greatly increase a person's stress levels.
Work	demands within the workplace are placed on all employees. A high workload, limited control at work and conflicting demands/unclear performance expectations can lead to stress.
Illness	physical illness can lead to stress because of the disruption to the individual's life and routine and stress can worsen an existing illness. Managing stress effectively is therefore critical for overall health.

Table 2. Effects of excessive stress (Mental Health Foundation, 2018).

Emotional symptoms	irritability, impatience, anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, self-doubt, panic, emotional withdrawal, despondency can make a person feel inadequate, insecure whilst feeling hopeless and depressed.
Behavioural symptoms	less social, less caring and more hostile and insensitive towards others. Many people respond to stress by either under or over eating, drinking, smoking and some people will engage in risk-taking behaviour.
Mentally	thoughts can become jumbled and confused and therefore a person may focus on worrying. It may become much harder for the person to make decisions or find solutions to problems.
Physical symptoms	tachycardia causing hypertension, which may lead to palpitations. Muscle tension increases which can develop into headaches, dizziness, jaw ache and sometimes insomnia. The mouth can become dry and the feeling of 'butterflies' in the stomach caused by a reduction of digestion. Hyperventilation and breathlessness and the changes of flow of blood to the skin can cause sweating, clammy hands and blushing

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