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When things get too much

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ABSTRACT: Registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) are highly trained and skilled individuals who on a daily basis provide compassion and care to animals and clients. Whilst always caring for others, RVNs can start to experience stress, leading to more serious implications such as burn out and compassion fatigue. Monitoring for stress, burnout and compassion fatigue is important and having coping mechanisms in place can make a significant difference. This article will explore these terms and how to incorporate coping strategies into everyday life.

Keywords: mental health; veterinary nursing; compassion fatigue; burnout; stress

Introduction

Forty-four percent of workers in the UK experience stress, depression or anxiety (HSE, 2020). With 1 in 5 workers taking a day off for stress (Mind, 2020a). Veterinary nursing is an occupation known to cause occupational stress, burnout and compassion fatigue (Black et al., 2011). Compassion fatigue can have a sudden onset and is an acute condition compared to burn out which results from chronic stress experienced in the workplace (WHO, 2019). This article will discuss the differences between compassion fatigue, burnout and occupational stress. There are contributing factors that cause these conditions with warning signs to look out for in one's self and in colleagues. RVNs are considered to be specifically at risk, but there are strategies that can help prevent symptoms with numerous sources to seek advice.

Why are nurses at risk?

When working in a veterinary practice, RVNs may be exposed to distressing situations such as animals in pain and grieving owners. There are often moral and ethical dilemmas to come to terms with and in some cases RVNs are also having to care for others when returning home, for example; looking after children (Compassion Fatigue - Vetlife, 2020). In addition, the long hours associated with veterinary practice can start to cause stress with the average time worked by RVNs being 33.9 hours week (RCVS, 2019). Working on call may also result in RVNs getting less sleep than required.

Veterinary nursing is an incredibly varied job which includes tasks such as taking radiographs, monitoring anaesthesia, supporting owners and assisting in emergency situations; this means a lot is expected of RVNs. Having such a high skill set and burden of responsibilities can lead to experiencing high amounts of pressure. High stress levels can lead to deterioration in mental health, which in veterinary practice is often downplayed and underestimated (Poli, 2017).

Occupational stress

Signs of stress can include irritability, anxiety, feelings of worry and depression, amongst others (Mind, 2020a). Work based stress happens when a person has high work demands, challenges in the workplace or, lack of support (WHO, 2020). When workplace pressure becomes too much, it leads to occupational stress which can have very serious negative effects on psychological and physical health (Mind, 2020a). Warning signs of stress include; more time off, late for work, increased arguments in teams and mood swings (HSE, 2020).

Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue happens when a person is repeatedly exposed to distressing events and anguish whilst providing empathy to both patients and owners. This can result in RVNs experiencing apathy (Peters, 2018). Compassion fatigue is also known as secondary post-traumatic stress, this happens by indirectly experiencing a traumatic event, for example, comforting a grief-stricken owner or assisting with an emergency (Figley, 2002).

Factors that contribute to compassion fatigue include the stresses of working in a busy environment, with the pressure of being compassionate and a care provider for long shifts (Mulero, 2015). Compassion fatigue can also be caused by lifestyle such as lack of sleep, a difficult home life and as mentioned above being involved in high intensity situations. Signs of compassion fatigue include but are not limited to; insomnia, unable to concentrate, feeling weighed down by people's suffering, feelings of guilt for people or animals suffering, physical and mental exhaustion, changes in eating (eating too much or too little), lack of self-care, complaining about work more and denial (Carter, 2014).

It is important to note that compassion fatigue can be reversed or the symptoms eased by focusing on self-care, talking to someone that is trusted, as well as making some lifestyle changes. Where Compassion fatigue can have a sudden onset, burnout involves an accumulation of stress which happens over time (Compassion Fatigue – Therapy Blog, 2020).

Burnout

Burnout is a state of exhaustion seen emotionally and physically with a primary cause of stress. When stress does not ease, lack of motivation and energy can be experienced (Smith et al., 2019). In a survey of 992 RVNs in the UK 92.8% were at a moderate or high risk of burnout with 68.1% at a moderate or high risk of secondary traumatic stress (Smith, 2016). Factors that contribute to burnout include;

- Work related issues such as feelings of being under appreciated
- Feeling of having no control
- High pressure situations
- Lack of support both inside and outside of work
- Not getting adequate sleep
- Personality (Table 1).

Burnout symptoms include, negative thoughts, lack of motivation, wanting to quit, self-isolation and exhaustion (Smith et al., 2019).

Contributing factors

The 2019 survey of RVNs carried out by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), demonstrates the biggest issues concerning RVNs are stress, pay and client expectations (RCVS, 2019). Clients still struggle to recognise the difference between veterinary surgeons and RVNs and how they play an equally important role, this can ultimately lead to feelings of under appreciation (Romero, 2020). RVNs visibility in practice and in the media is very limited and RVNs are often overlooked (Davidson, 2017). They are commonly left out of financial decisions and the overall running of practice (MacDonald, 2019). RVNs have so much to offer in this department they can use their experience and knowledge of how the clinical team works to organise the running of the day, come up with ways to improve patient welfare and help the practice become more forward thinking.

Inadequate management can account for negativity in the work place such as; micro-managing, bullying and intimidating behaviour (Muller-Heyndyk, 2018). Veterinary nursing is already a stressful occupation and inadequate leadership will add strain on staff resulting in a workplace that is an unsafe psychological environment. An RVNs mental and physical wellbeing is just as important as the patients and there are ways to achieve a better mental wellbeing (Lloyd & Campion, 2017).

How to help

Speaking out is the main way to start getting things back on track. Although it can be hard to start the initial dialogue, without it, things mostly likely will not change. Speak to a trusted colleague, family member or friend. Speak to management, the head nurse or clinical directors.

Ways of managing stress include having hobbies outside of work, making self-care a priority and setting boundaries where work is not taken home (Compassion Fatigue - Vetlife, 2020). Identifying triggers that heighten feelings, address the causes of stress experienced and try to organise and structure the day where possible (Mind, 2020b). Writing down the issues that are causing those emotions and avoiding negative people can also reduce stress. Trying to accept feelings rather than denying them and realise that there are things that cannot be changed. Remember to eat healthy and get plenty of sleep (Smith et al., 2019).

It is important to monitor for warning signs of stress, burnout and compassion fatigue in colleagues as well. If someone's behaviour changes it can be a sign that something is wrong, such as they are experiencing stress. Signs include; changes in mood, withdrawing, being late to work and a lack of motivation (HSE, 2020). Approaching individuals who are demonstrating these behaviours should be done with sensitivity. Checking in with them and letting them know that they can discuss issues is important. Keeping an open dialogue can prevent any negative feelings developing if colleagues work performance is starting to deteriorate. Rather than avoiding the topic, arrange to have an informal, friendly chat with them. After all they could be really struggling and just letting them know that they can talk about their feelings in a safe way could make a huge difference.

Conclusion

Developing coping mechanisms is important to ensure emotional wellbeing. By reaching out when support is needed and monitoring for the signs of stress, burnout and compassion fatigue in both one's self and in colleagues can help prevent it from happening and stop individuals from potentially leaving the profession. Veterinary nursing is an essential profession with limited numbers and without it many practices would struggle to exist, so it is vital emotional wellbeing is made a priority. Organisations such as Vet life and Mind are able to offer advice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Table 1. Types of personality and their traits.

Type A	High achievers, more prone to being competitive and self-critical (Mcleod, 2017)
Type B	Can be more relaxed and tolerate of people compared to Type A (Mcleod, 2017)
Type C	Can be more suppressive of emotions and tend to avoid conflict (Mcleod, 2017)
Perfectionism	Can be scared of failure and can be hard on themselves for not achieving perfection (Scott, 2020)
Pessimism	More likely to worry, expect bad things to happen and have little confidence in themselves (Scott, 2020)

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