



Di Wilson RVN

Di qualified in 2009, and has been in general practice since. She has worked in both small animal practice, equine and helped out on farm calls. She is currently working at Macqueens Veterinary Center in both first opinion and orthopaedic referrals. Di has also volunteered at ACE (Animal Care in Egypt) working with limited equipment on all species of animal including camels. She is currently studying for the Improve International Surgical Nursing Certificate. She enjoys surgical nursing, the rehab of orthopaedic patients and teaching the future of veterinary nurses through her role as a clinical coach.

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My mental health, work life balance: how I manage my mental health issues

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ABSTRACT: Many people still feel that there is a stigma attached to mental health problems and therefore will not discuss them with work colleagues. Some colleagues may feel uncomfortable as they did not know how to act around you, use this as an opportunity to educate them. It is important to recognise triggers that may cause stress and anxiety and trying different types of coping mechanisms to help alleviate the symptoms. Having supportive work colleagues can make a big difference on how you feel, find someone that you can talk to and do not feel ashamed that you suffer with mental health issues.

Keywords: mental health; coping mechanisms; anxiety; support

Introduction

This is an interview between Di Wilson and Nicola Ruedisueli. Di wanted to highlight the impact that her mental health has had on her nursing career. She feels strongly that people should talk to others about how they are feeling so they can receive the support they need. She has numerous tips on coping mechanisms that help get her through challenging times and is working in a very supportive practice which has helped her immensely.

Interview

Nikki - You volunteered to talk to the VNJ readers about your mental health (MH) and how you have addressed some of the challenges you faced. For a lot of people, it is still considered a taboo subject; were you open about your mental health with your work colleagues from the start or did you wait until they knew you a bit better?

Di - *In this practice, I was open from the start, certainly with the managers and then after a couple of weeks with the team.*

Nikki - Would you advise people to approach their employer to let them know they are having mental health problems?

Di - *It really depends on the practice. I've been in a few practices where I haven't mentioned*

it because I was worried what they would think about me. I have been bullied in the workplace and when I mentioned it to the managers, they didn't know how to deal with it and I eventually just left the practice.

Nikki - Why do you think people who struggle with MH and/or anxiety are reluctant to be open at work?

Di - *There is still a taboo about all mental health issues. I suffer from depression and anxiety and it is with regards to these that I will be basing my responses.*

I think people worry about how it will affect working relationships. Some people feel awkward once you mention MH issues and they worry about what to say to make sure they don't upset you and it can create a tense atmosphere.

Nikki - If people don't feel comfortable in their practice or when they discuss mental health; it doesn't go according to plan. How did you go about changing practices, what were you looking for in a new practice?

Di - *I would recommend finding someone in practice that you can talk to, that understands what it feels like. You can often pick up on people who have also had to manage a MH issue by something they may say. As a caring profession, we feel empathy and so you*

may find you can talk to someone who hasn't experienced anxiety or depression.

I actually locumed for a year after leaving my last practice and before finding my current one. I know locuming can be scary and is not for everyone, but for me it worked. Speaking to new people every few weeks, was good for me. It also gave me the opportunity to "try before you buy" different practices. This is how I found my current practice.

Nikki - Was there a point where you stopped being afraid about talking about your MH?

Di - It was finding a GP that understood; I had tried numerous types of antidepressants and eventually found one that suited me. This improved my confidence; it was almost like a light switch going on where I felt more comfortable.

You will come across people who don't know how to behave around you as they are worried that they may say something wrong. Don't shun them, educate them. If someone has a broken leg, they will have time off to rest, the same is for a broken head, you need rest and therefore time off. Simplify it for people who don't understand.

You may find that once you start talking about mental health, you will open the flood gates and more staff will do it as well. Often, when just one person is brave enough to start a conversation, others join in with their own experiences. Remember you are not a drop of water in the sea, we are all in the sea.

Nikki - Are there any work-related triggers that you are aware of?

Di - I get anxious when we are busy and disorganised. I prefer to work in a structured way, so my practice has protocols and SOPs for most things. The senior nurse creates the ops list so we know when procedures are happening. We prepare as much as we can in advance so we aren't running around trying to find equipment for the patient. It creates a much better environment to work in and everyone knows what they are doing like a well-oiled machine. Also don't be afraid to ask for help for colleagues when things are getting on top of you.

Nikki - If you are having a "bad day", what are your coping mechanisms whilst at work?

Di - I will often take myself out of the situation for 5 minutes. My practice is very supportive of all staff and would rather someone take a 5-minute break when they need to rather than struggle through the feeling. I use grounding mechanisms such

as the 5,4,3,2,1 method. This is where you look at 5 things around you, feel 4 things (the ground under your feet, the wind on your skin), 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and remember 1 thing you can taste. I also shrug my shoulders, hold in position and release and repeat a few times. This gives the physical feeling of letting go. Often just standing outside in the fresh air is enough to move me past the feeling of anxiety and I can go back in and focus on my tasks.

Sometimes, I do need to just sit down for five minutes and have a cry. Whatever feels right at that specific time is what you need to do; do not fight it, this is definitely something I have come to realise over the years.

Nikki - What coping mechanisms do you employ outside of work?

Di - When I am outside of work there are several ways I can manage my mood, it really depends on the situation and how I am feeling.

I walk my 6 dogs, and train and compete at Agility with them (COVID restrictions allowing); I am also part of an open water swimming club. Whilst this may not be for everyone, I find it really invigorating, and also a way of release. There is nothing like the feeling of swimming in silky smooth cold water. I also lie on a Shakti acupressure mat, I know it sounds weird, but it heightens your skin sensitivity and has similar response to acupressure massage so also aids with pain relief.

Sometimes it is as simple as breathing exercises; I breathe in for 4 seconds and hold, then breathe out for 7-9 seconds so I am breathing out more carbon dioxide, this is really good if I find myself starting to hyperventilate.

The main thing to say is to try lots of different things to see what suits you and accept that sometimes you might just want to sit on the sofa and do nothing. Don't feel guilty about this, you are allowed to have 'me' time. Run yourself a nice hot bath, read a book or watch a favourite film. You may feel guilty about not taking the dogs out for a long walk, but some days, you won't feel like it; don't force yourself. Don't ever feel guilty for doing or not doing something, your personal health is the most important bit, dogs don't die from missing a walk and the house won't fall down if it is not cleaned daily.

I have 'go to' programmes on TV such as Time Team, Big Bang Theory and the Harry Potter films, I enjoy reading, both new literature and old favourites, which offer so much comfort to me.

Nikki - Why do you think the nature of our job make us more likely to experience episodes of poor MH/anxiety.

Di - It is well known that caring professions suffer more from mental health issues. We have a lot of empathy which means we are emotionally connected to our patients and clients. We also tend to want to look after others rather than ourselves and feel guilty if we focus on how we are feeling.

Nikki - What advice would you give to someone who is struggling with mental health at work?

Di - I have been suffering from mental health issues for around 18 years and it took me 15/16 years to get where I am today. There is not a quick fix or a cure as such, it is a managed disease; like diabetes or, hyperthyroidism (for example). Listen to your body and try to notice what you're doing; this may help you find a pattern to triggers and/or coping mechanisms.

Nikki - Can you give us a little bit of an insight into your experiences at practice where you have had a difficult time?

Di - I've experienced bullying and being ignored by senior members of staff, sometimes people don't realise that their actions are classified as bullying. No form of bullying should be ignored, if you can't speak to your line manager about it, or feel you are getting nowhere, don't be afraid to go higher up the chain. Send an email if you feel more comfortable doing it this way.

Isolation, or the feeling of being isolated at work is a big one, especially for me, and a lot of the time I self-initiate this, I feel that people don't want to help or are too busy so I just plough on and struggle, which leads to an overwhelming feeling. When all I have to do is ask for help, people don't always isolate you or not offer help, they often think that you are coping, so get on with other jobs.

I have also been made to feel that I have had to step down from a senior nurse position, which I ended up doing, not long after this, I did leave the practice completely.

Nikki - A lot of people have a glass of wine or two when they get home or eat chocolate cake when they are feeling stressed. Do you think this helps?

Di - Be careful of alcohol as this can fuel the fire, and can lead to a downward spiral. When I get home, I tend to drink a couple of pints of cold water, I have found staying hydrated to be a big help. Getting time to have

drinks during work time can be difficult, but I do notice a difference in my stress and anxiety levels if I am well hydrated. A small amount of very good quality dark chocolate can help you feel good for a longer period of time, than eating lots of milk chocolate. Having a bath whilst reading a book may be better, which gives you time to resist the craving.

Nikki - What help is there available for VNs, SVN's and ACAs?

Di - It can be hard finding the support that works for you but there is a lot out there. GPs are a good place to start and they can refer you to local support. When asking for a doctor's appointment to discuss any MH issue, be sure to ask for a doctor who has an interest in it, as this can be a massive help to you in getting the right help and starting on the path to a more 'normal' feeling you. There are numerous Apps available for smart phones that offer help in mindfulness.

You may find that your local Council run CBT sessions. There are numerous apps that can help such as MIND, or the NHS. Vetlife are available for the veterinary profession, for both VS and RVNs to talk to. The Samaritans can be helpful as sometimes it is easier to speak to a stranger rather than friends and family. It will be less personal initially and that gives you confidence to tell others. CALM specifically help men's mental health. I have included a list of some of the numerous organisations that are available for help, Table 1.

Table 1. Organizations offering help and their contact information.

Where to go for help.	Contact Details.
MIND	www.mind.org.uk 0300 123 3393
VETLIFE	www.vetlife.org.uk 0303 040 255 1
SAMARITANS	www.samaritans.org 116 123
NHS	www.nhs.uk search mental health
CALM	www.thecalmzone.net 0800 58 58 58
Mental Health UK	www.mentalhealth-uk.org
Mental Health Swims	www.mentalhealthswims.co.uk

There are mental health first aider courses available and you don't need to be suffering from mental health issues to be a first aider. This can help people at work understand the process and what support is available. www.sja.org.uk/run Mental Health First Aid Courses.

In conclusion. You are not alone, even though you may feel that you are alone. Mind UK say that 1 in 4 people in England will experience some kind of mental health problem each year, and 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as depression and anxiety) in any given week.

Investigate what help is available to you, and if you need to speak to your employer but feel unsure how to, speak to a professional on how to approach the subject at work; or take along someone who you are happy to have sit in on the conversation.

Explore coping mechanisms, what works for one person may not work for you.

Do not feel embarrassed.

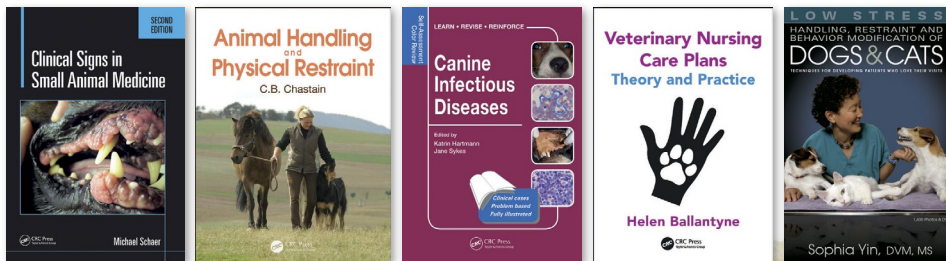
Nikki – Thank you so much for discussing your mental health with us, I know it can't be easy. I think one of the important things you've said is that you should talk to someone about how you are feeling, whether that is someone at work or at an association that supports mental health.

It would be great if people can share any hints and tips with us on any coping mechanisms you may have to manage stressful situations. Contact Nikki on nicola@bvna.co.uk

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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