

# Mental health in the veterinary industry

Changing our mindset and taking care of ourselves

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Laura C. Ryan is a student at Central College of Animal Studies and in full-time employment at Anderson's Veterinary Surgery. She became a veterinary care assistant (VCA) in 2018 and a student in 2019. Laura was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of 18. This, and her role as a mother, has given her deeper insight into managing emotions and stress.

**ABSTRACT** It is well known within the veterinary profession that the job can impact our mental health. Burnout, compassion fatigue and stress are starting to be openly talked about, but more can be done in terms of recognition and conversation. I wanted to share my insight as a student veterinary nurse with bipolar disorder, and discuss how I am trying to change my own mentality and support others. At the end of the article you will find some useful websites with information on how to access support. If you have any concerns, contact Vetlife or your GP.

**Keywords** Student veterinary nurse, mental health, mental wellbeing, compassion fatigue, stress

## Introduction

At the interview for a place on my veterinary nursing course, it was impressed on me that the profession would take its toll on my mental health. It was something I was already aware of, from my time in practice as a kennel assistant, so I expected it to be mentioned. I was honest and disclosed my previous experiences, my bipolar diagnosis and how supportive I had found my practice. I was uncertain whether this would affect my application but, if anything, I think my awareness and honest approach to mental health may have strengthened it.

There's no doubt this profession has its emotional highs, but it also comes with an emotional burden which can be both mentally and physically draining. Life in practice is not linear and neither is our mental health; as a profession we must learn how to regulate, express and reset ourselves.

## Establish and protect boundaries

The first step to supporting and improving our mental health is establishing boundaries and setting our own pace. Life in practice can be chaotic for any member of the team, regardless of whether you're a full-time vet or a part-time receptionist. There is always pressure to be on top of everything and to do as much as possible, as quickly as possible. This isn't always realistic or healthy.

When it comes to my own mental health, I have frequent ups and downs, even on my medication. On the up days I can work at a fast pace and have several 'tabs' open in my head, but on the down days I don't have the same mental capacity. It's important we respect these mental cues in the same way we'd listen to a physical cue, such as pain in our body to indicate we're not up to lifting a 30 kg dog. We should be prepared to adapt to challenges, go at our own pace and not take on tasks we can't manage – even if that sometimes means saying 'no'.

I'm also mother to a 4-year-old, so I'm well aware how sleep deprivation and exhaustion can alter tolerance and levels of concentration. The ability to say 'no' and focus

on one task at a time results in us doing a better job, with fewer mistakes. There's no shame in having a limit or a bad day. The same applies to those studying: it's OK to prioritise your studies, assignments, practical logs and personal life. When prioritising, weigh up importance against urgency and include your clinical coach in your decisions so they can support you. Being a nurse is hard work, and being a nurse while studying is even harder.



Setting boundaries includes not regularly working outside your normal hours. There is an unhealthy culture around staying late and skipping breaks in all professions. It's natural to want to help others and the practice, but home life is just as important. There are, of course, circumstances where staying late can't be helped, but it shouldn't be seen as a given. Having spoken to friends across a range of practices (varying from small animal practices in London to mixed practices in the countryside and specialist referral hospitals), there seems to be an expectation to overwork throughout the profession. Just because this is considered normal, it doesn't mean it's OK, which is why, within these practices, staff are starting to recognise their worth and move away from this culture. We should respect ourselves as we respect others.

## Choose gratitude over apologies

It's fine to take time out of your schedule to look after yourself. You can't do your best work if you're mentally exhausted, so don't feel you have to apologise for not overworking. Ultimately, if we're not looking after ourselves, we'll burn out – the signs of which vary from person to person but often include a lack of motivation, generalised anxiety, exhaustion, insomnia, emotional vulnerability and being easily overwhelmed.

From personal experience I know that burnout can also show itself in the form of overworking, overstretching and hyperactivity. If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, it might be time to reflect on how your perspective could be affecting your mental health and wellbeing.

Instead of turning inwards and continuing to overburden yourself, consider asking for support and focus on responding with gratitude rather than apologies. Chances are, you'll be surprised by the positive reaction you'll receive.

By thanking others for their help, rather than feeling guilty and apologising for needing it, the emphasis shifts to applauding the actions of others rather than undermining ourselves, which is far more uplifting and beneficial to all concerned. For example, if you're having a bad day and need a shoulder to cry on, it can be difficult to reach out but, if you do, you'll usually find colleagues are happy to help because they understand your frustrations. By thanking them and focusing on the positives that came from the encounter, instead of worrying about taking up their time, an overall positive effect will be enhanced for you and your colleagues.

## Counteract toxic positivity by talking

There's an unhelpful culture that celebrates a positive mental attitude in all circumstances and, in contrast, sees anything less as being unacceptably negative. This extreme mindset doesn't allow for personal limits or boundaries. In reality, we all drift between these polar opposites and would benefit from conversations around how we are feeling and why we are struggling, rather than merely being labelled. These discussions are central to a healthy workplace. Being able to talk about your feelings and what you're experiencing, with people who can empathise and offer alternative perspectives, is liberating. It also encourages others to feel comfortable to turn to you, which helps to counteract a toxic culture.

I openly discuss my mental health and medication with colleagues and have the same approach in college with my peers and tutors. Talking openly allows me to look after myself emotionally and physically. For example, if I notify others of a change to my medication that may make me feel ill, tutors can allow me to work from home, or the practice can keep me away from clinical waste. Openness also means my peers feel comfortable talking to me, and allow me to listen or help them navigate a problem – something I feel is a privilege. I'm fortunate that my practice is tightly knit and I'm aware this isn't the case everywhere.

As a profession, we're taught to hide emotions such as showing fear in the face of a fractious patient, or sadness when discussing euthanasia or a patient's quality of life with a client. Recently, after a particularly challenging week, I got quite upset at the loss of a young patient who had been involved in a road traffic accident. It was my third patient to pass away in emergency circumstances that week; it was the straw that broke the camel's back. The vet I'd been working with told me not to be upset and that finally triggered me to cry. It opened up a conversation about how



difficult the profession is and how being emotionally invested in our patients makes us good at our jobs. Given that emotion is at the heart of the profession, we should be more comfortable talking about our feelings and encourage colleagues to do the same.

## Develop self-help strategies

I know from personal experience just how helpful basic mindfulness can be in aiding good mental health. Mindfulness doesn't have to be meditation or anything taxing – it can be practised almost anywhere and used 'in the moment' to ground yourself in chaotic situations. It can be as simple as pausing and breathing. In both my up and down states, I find breathing exercises, such as the 4-7-8 technique, tremendously helpful. I breathe in slowly for 4 seconds, hold my breath for 7 seconds and exhale slowly for 8 seconds. I repeat this for a few minutes until I feel more grounded and reset.

Another technique I recommend trying, particularly when you feel overstimulated, is to drink a glass of ice-cold water or a fizzy drink. I've been advised to do this when I feel the onset of panic or sensory overload. The theory is that the cold and fizz can interrupt your thoughts and prevent them from spiralling out of control, giving you the opportunity to ground yourself. Anyone who suffers from anxiety will appreciate that this can make a big difference. Even just taking 15 minutes to drink a hot drink without any distractions, so you can compose yourself, could be enough to get you through a tough day. However, it's important to add that these self-help strategies should be used in

addition to, not in lieu of, taking adequate time out and setting boundaries.

Finding your Zen is imperative, whether it's through something as simple as gardening, meditation, art or baking, or via other approaches such as therapies. I find painting watercolours helpful and, as a mum, it's great that I can also share this time with my daughter, who enjoys painting alongside me. Finding something that frees your mind and still fits into everyday life is the best approach, as you're more likely to do it regularly. Recognising the need, and taking the time, for mental space is a useful for work, study and home.

## In summary

Practising and studying in such an intense profession, and with such emotional connotations, can be overwhelming. The job comes with great rewards in seeing patients grow and heal, but there is also a lot of heartbreak and sadness. Take each day as it comes and seek help as and when you need it. This help could be in the form of taking time for yourself, talking to your peers and/or tutors, or speaking to your GP about further support or medication. It's vital to recognise the time you put into your work and studies, and to channel the same level of energy into looking after yourself.

Chronic mental health issues have affected my time in practice but I'm determined they won't deter me from veterinary nursing. In fact, I think they've made me even more passionate about looking out for others in the profession. Whether you have a mental health disorder or not, the job will take its toll. It's important we remember to take care of ourselves and others, as well as our patients.

## Links to useful resources

[www.nhs.uk/mental-health/](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/)

[www.vetlife.org.uk/](http://www.vetlife.org.uk/)

[www.vets-in-mind.org/](http://www.vets-in-mind.org/)

[www.mind.org.uk/workplace/](http://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/)

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/)