

Is it Time for a Positive Psychology Revolution in Veterinary Workplaces?

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Not unlike the field of psychology in the 20th century, veterinary mental health research has been focused on identifying and treating the many problems in the profession, such as psychological distress and burnout. Veterinarians are leaving the profession in alarming numbers, and it is time for a revolutionary new approach to veterinary wellbeing. The science of positive psychology brought about a dramatic pivot in research - from investigating dysfunction in people's lives, to discovering the positives and increasing wellbeing. The cornerstone of this new field is to measure and build human flourishing. This summarises the current issues facing veterinarians in the workplace and how positive psychology and its evidence-based interventions may benefit this group.

What is positive psychology?

The field of positive psychology (PP) was founded in 1998 as a sub-discipline of psychology by Martin Seligman, the American Psychological Association president. He felt that after World War II, psychology was focused on the study of disorder and dysfunction, ignoring what led to happiness and thriving (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). His seminal president's speech called for a change in psychology's focus away from what is wrong with people and toward human flourishing and building more positive lives.

As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describe, this new science of PP was not about self-help gurus. Instead, it was centred around scientific methods and practical solutions to understand and foster human strengths and positive functioning. Initially, research focused on what makes life worth living - how individuals can attain happiness in the present, satisfaction with the past, hope for the future, and how positive individual and group traits can be developed. After Seligman's speech, there was massive growth in PP and wellbeing research

(Rusk & Waters, 2013). Multiple theories were developed and studied, which confirmed that wellbeing is a complex and multifaceted construct. This first wave of PP was mainly focused on the individual and interventions to improve their wellbeing.

Along with the growth in PP, there was valid criticism that the field was too focused on the positive and was promising more than it could deliver (Lazarus, 2003). McNulty and Fincham (2012) questioned whether PP was ignoring that negative emotions could sometimes have value, and positive emotions could be detrimental? In PP 2.0, Wong (2011) called for a balanced model, acknowledging the complex relationship between positive and negative emotions. Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) recognised the dialectical nature of wellbeing, that the positive and negative elements, although opposed, were linked and dependent on each other. While still focusing on human flourishing, the field began to look at the impact of problems on people's lives. This second wave aimed to support WB by enhancing the positive while also managing the negatives.

The most recent shift in PP has seen researchers move beyond individual psychology to investigate the contexts and systems that impact people, emphasising social and cultural factors in the workplace and community (Lomas, 2015). This third wave recognises that it is important to improve the context of people's lives while not losing sight of the individual. The aim is to create workplaces and communities that promote wellbeing while also supporting people with the tools to flourish (Kern et al., 2019). This was always part of Seligman's vision for PP (2000).

The second and third wave have broadened PP's scope by considering the challenges people face and the circumstances that impact their lives while not forgetting its core aim of helping humans flourish. The goal is to discover what improves people's lives in specific situations. The challenges facing the veterinary profession is one such situation. Research focus

has been on why many veterinarians are struggling, and in this article, I suggest that a shift to a more positive approach is overdue, investigating what interventions can support thriving in the challenging world of veterinarians.

What issues are facing veterinarians?

The veterinary profession in Australia and internationally faces many challenges. These include the high levels of attrition from the profession, poor psychological and subjective wellbeing, psychological distress, burnout, and suicide. A 2018 global veterinary wellness survey (WSAVA, 2019) confirmed that there was a likely correlation between working in veterinary practices and an increased risk of mental ill-health.

Many studies have demonstrated concerning veterinary occupational stress levels leading to poor psychological health and low wellbeing (Fritschi et al., 2009; Hatch et al., 2011; Nett et al., 2015). Fritschi et al. (2009) found that 1/3 of a cohort of over 2000 Australian veterinarians self-reported poor psychological health; and a cross-sectional study of over 11000 veterinarians in North America found that 1/11 reported serious psychological distress, 1/6 reported suicidal ideation, and 1/3 reported a previous depressive episode (Nett et al., 2015). Veterinarians, when compared to the general population, experience more negative emotions at work (Fritschi et al., 2019; Moses et al., 2018), are at increased risk of burnout (Hatch et al., 2011; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020) and have a higher suicide rate (Jones-Fairnie et al., 2008; Nett et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2015). These factors contribute to veterinarians deciding to leave their career.

The number of veterinarians permanently leaving the profession impacts the availability of experienced clinicians - the 2019 Australian Government report on the veterinary labour market showed a shortage for a third consecutive year (Australian Government, 2019). In a qualitative study, Arbe et al. (2021) found that the cause of attrition in Australian veterinarians

was multifactorial. Personal factors that led to a veterinarian leaving the profession included - perfectionism, negative thoughts and affect, lack of meaning, compromised values, lack of free time, impact on relationships, and decreased physical and mental health. Contributing workplace stressors included – huge workloads, moral and ethical conflicts, lack of support, and poor relationships with colleagues. Additional causes of stress identified in veterinarians include empathic distress (compassion fatigue), clients' unrealistic expectations, and a lack of control over treatment choices. (Arbe et al., 2019; Hutton, 2019; Moses et al., 2018). Continuing attrition at current rates is untenable as the shortage of experienced practitioners will be exacerbated.

Two factors that further compound veterinary mental health challenges are a perceived stigma in the veterinary profession towards people with mental illness, and confidentiality concerns when seeking help. This leads to a reluctance in veterinarians to utilise professional psychological support (Bartram & Baldwin, 2010; Knipe et al., 2018; Moses et al., 2018; Nett et al., 2015).

These findings suggest there are wellbeing issues at both the individual and organisational level in the veterinary profession that are currently not well managed. PP offers new approaches with the potential to improve veterinary wellbeing and build resilience.

Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) and veterinarians

PPIs are evidence-based intentional activities that individuals and businesses can implement to improve wellbeing. One example of an evidence-based PPI is the 3 good things exercise. This daily activity involves writing down 3 good things that happened in your day and what your role in them was. When continued for just 7 days during a randomised, placebo-controlled study, Seligman et al. (2005) found that it decreased depressive symptoms and increased positive emotions (happiness) for up to 6 months after the intervention ceased.

Veterinary mental health research has focused on problems such as stress, suicide and depression (Cake et al., 2017), but in recent years there has been an increasing focus on wellbeing solutions, coping skills and building resilience (Cake et al., 2017; McArthur et al., 2017). These have been identified as core competencies for veterinarians by numerous professional bodies (Cake et al., 2017) and the Australian VetSet2Go employability project (Cake et al., 2019). Despite this, there is a dearth of studies assessing the effectiveness of PPIs in veterinarians (Rohlf, 2018).

A 'wellbeing toolkit' has been suggested to provide actionable strategies and solutions while also building personal resources (Cake et al., 2019; Moir & Van Den Brink, 2019). Such a toolkit could include PPIs to increase positive emotions, decrease unhelpful thoughts, and manage self-criticism and occupational stressors. The goal is to increase engagement, wellbeing and resilience while decreasing the risk of burnout and other negative mental health sequelae. Some of the PPIs that may be useful to veterinarians are discussed below.

Increasing positive emotions (PE)

The work of Baumeister et al. (2001) identified that humans have a strong negativity bias – they spot the bad things easier than the good. Veterinary work encourages clinicians to look for problems, further strengthening this bias and increasing negative emotions (Fritschi et al., 2019; Moses et al., 2018). To combat this negativity bias, it is important for veterinarians to consciously and deliberately notice the positives in their lives and to feel PE such as joy, gratitude and hope.

Fredrickson's (2001) broaden and build theory suggests there are both short and long-term benefits to increasing PE. The theory posits that PE broaden people's attention and thinking in the moment and build enduring personal resources over time that can be drawn upon at a later

date. These psychological and social resources can help build a buffer against the stressors in veterinary work and minimise lingering effects of negative emotions (Cake et al., 2017; Fredrickson, 2001). PE can create a positive spiral leading to improved psychological resilience, better coping and increased wellbeing (Cake et al., 2017; Fredrickson, 2001; Kok et al., 2013). PE don't only feel good in the moment; they may contribute to people's happiness and wellbeing in the future (Fredrickson, 2004).

PPIs that can increase PE include the aforementioned 3 good things exercise, loving-kindness meditation (Fredrickson et al., 2008), gratitude visit (Seligman et al., 2005), and random acts of kindness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Simple moments spent with pets can bring joy to some veterinarians during their day, and encouraging staff to identify and use their strengths in new ways can also increase PE (Seligman et al., 2005).

Other people can be an important source of PE (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Supportive colleagues and positive mentors are important coping and social resources for veterinarians (Nett et al., 2015; Wallace, 2017). In the veterinary workplace, it is essential to normalise and encourage asking for help and supporting each other (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020).

Managing the negatives with Mindfulness, self-compassion and other-focused compassion

Mindfulness and self-compassion interventions have been suggested to help manage self-criticism and perfectionism (Ferrari et al., 2019; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020) and improve wellbeing (Klein et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2019a+b; Neff et al., 2020). They have also been positively linked to resilience in veterinary students (McArthur et al., 2017). Mindfulness is learning how to be fully present and engaged in the moment, aware of your thoughts and emotions without distraction or judgment. Focusing on the present moment can decrease worry

about the past and future. There are many mindfulness training interventions, the simplest of which is a daily mindfulness meditation practice.

Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness and care you would give a loved one. Self-compassion is a skill that can be taught (Ferrari et al., 2019), and there are interventions, such as the self-compassion break, which are specific for caring professionals like veterinarians (Neff et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, veterinarians tend to be very self-critical, so learning to be kind to themselves is a valuable skill.

Having compassion for others has been proposed as an effective antidote to empathic distress. In the veterinary literature, 'compassion fatigue' is often cited as a major cause of occupational stress and burnout. However, multiple studies (Hofmeyer et al., 2020; Hutton, 2019; Klimecki & Singer, 2011) suggest that it is 'empathic fatigue' that is the problem, and compassion may be part of the solution. Compassion is defined as a strong feeling of concern for another person's suffering and the motivation to alleviate that suffering. Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions, and empathic distress can occur when another's negative emotions are felt, leading to personal distress for the empathiser. The 2 states have different sequelae - compassion is associated with PE (love and kindness) and prosocial motivation, while empathy can create negative emotions and lead to withdrawal (Klimecki & Singer, 2011). Training veterinarians in the use of compassion may help manage empathic distress - focusing on how they can help (compassion) rather than on the client's sadness (empathy) during euthanasia for example, can increase positive emotions and minimise negative ones (Klimecki & Singer, 2011).

Conclusion

To improve veterinary mental health and promote flourishing in the profession, it is not enough to manage problems such as burnout and psychological distress. It is essential to use a dual approach, also utilising interventions to increase happiness, support wellbeing and build resilience. The 3 waves of positive psychology have led the field toward researching and promoting individual flourishing, managing life's challenges, while remaining cognisant of the circumstances and context of people's lives. Veterinary workplaces could benefit from the positive psychology revolution and all that it has discovered about enhancing and supporting wellbeing. PP, however, is not a panacea – the evidence-based interventions are not one size fits all - they can help some people in some circumstances. Developing bespoke PPIs to suit veterinarians' particular needs should be a priority in future veterinary mental health research.

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