

By Kathleen Ruby, PhD



Kathleen Ruby is the head of WSU's College of Veterinary Medicine Counseling and Wellness Department and is a licensed professional clinical counselor. Write to Dr. Ruby at editor@myEVT.com.

DOCTOR, *Heal Thyself*

Stress & the Veterinary Professional

When I became one of the first full-time counselors in a veterinary college in 1998, my position had been created partly in response to the fact that two students had committed suicide in the preceding few years. Stories, verbal reports, and lately, sociologic research, indicate that suicide is much higher in the veterinary profession than even in other health care professions.

According to recent studies from the UK and Germany, veterinarians are four times as likely to commit suicide than the population as a whole, and two times more likely than doctors, nurses, and other health workers.¹ This frightening statistic compels those of us who seek to mitigate such tragic endings to dig deeply into what might be causing these negatively skewed numbers.

We see many signs of chronic stress in our profession—stress-related illness, burnout, job-hopping, compassion fatigue, depression, anxiety, suicide, and strained relationships. Our profession exudes stressors—life and death situations, long hours, shift work, angry clients, chronically sick patients, people who resent paying for the care we provide or refuse the care needed.

And we went into medicine to be heroes and healers.

Of course, we also make huge differences in the lives of the people and the animals we serve. Veterinarians and veterinary teams minister, educate, stop pain, and heal with our knowledge and technical skills. We get to enjoy watching our patients live long, healthy lives in loving families as a result of the care and knowledge we invest in them. I often tell

others that medicine is the agony and the ecstasy of careers!

I've also witnessed stress in action in my husband's 25-year medical career. One associate struggled with alcohol, while another circumvented protective systems to obtain narcotics before succumbing to his addiction. A few doctors had illicit relationships with patients, others routinely abused staff and disrespected colleagues. And doctors weren't the only team members who struggled with these issues.

I've also known doctors, veterinarians, as well as nurses and staff in both fields, who were consistently amazing, able to deal with impending death, angry people, or inefficient new employees and seem to truly enjoy their work, leaving calm, clarity, and compassion in their wakes.

Sink or Swim

So, what makes the difference between people who ride the waves of everyday storms and those who end up going down? Research in a new book, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* by Stanford psychology professor Sonja Lyubomirsky found that approximately 40% of our happiness "set point" is determined by genetics or biology. Surprisingly, just 10% of how we feel about our world is influenced by circumstances such as winning the lottery. Fifty percent of what makes us happy, and more resilient to stress, is under our control. This is powerful and welcome news.

We all respond to stressors differently. Indeed, what triggers stress in one person generates excitement or a pleasant rush in another. Some of us are graced with a cool-reaction autonomic nervous system and can "go with the flow" more comfortably than

those of us who are hot reactors. As I tell my clients, "Your biology and heredity determined that you have blonde hair, blue eyes, a medium build, *and* a hair-trigger stress response. That's your starting point. How you manage that trigger is up to you."

Recognizing both our biology and our substantial potential for positive malleability can be helpful as we seek to keep our stress levels in line. If daily stressors are "withdrawals" on your well-being bank account, how do you make deposits? There are as many ways to manage stress as there are people to invent them. We'll cover some proactive ideas in this issue and on myEVT.com, but the best place to begin is to be mindful when you are becoming overstressed and how you can dispel it.

Quotes from wise people often provide great "pearls" to get us started. Let me share a few with you. Please do yourself a favor. Pick one and practice its advice this week. Begin to heal yourself!

The greatest healing therapy is friendship and love.

—Hubert Humphrey

Nature tops the list of potent tranquilizers and stress reducers. The mere sound of moving water has been shown to lower blood pressure.—Patch Adams

When you really listen to yourself, you can heal yourself.

—Ceanne Derohan

References

1. Veterinary surgeons and suicide: A structured review of possible influences on increased risk. Bartram DJ, Baldwin DS. *Vet Rec* 166:388-397, 2010.

Skillsets addressed in this article: self-awareness; self-management