

# The WOW Factor Managing Your Emotional Well-Being



Terra Shastri, OVMA Manager of Business Development

While her days are much brighter now, it wasn't always this way. "I woke up one morning and felt like this was it – I couldn't live anymore."

Dr. Kim Pope-Robinson had a successful veterinary career starting in equine then moved to small animal medicine due to a physically debilitating connective tissue disorder. She worked for a large corporate chain and progressed to a Medical Director role where she managed over 60 veterinarians.

Pope explains, "I would suffer from compassion fatigue as a veterinarian but it continued when I was the Medical Director. I would listen to client and patient situations and I would suffer from secondary trauma in my pursuit of figuring out what I could do for this veterinarian in front of me. As time went on, I became suicidal."

Pope describes her feelings during that time as feeling trapped and alone with the burden of responsibilities such as bills to pay and staff to serve. She also felt like she was failing people and got bit by what she refers to as the "cynical serpent" – constantly blaming and judging things or people when something went wrong. In the moment when she was ready to take her life, Pope's horse appeared in her mind. She realized how much her connection with her horse made her feel better. "I went back to things I loved doing and had not done in a long time, like running and seeing my horse more often," shares Pope, "and these connections helped me move forward."

Pope's experience taught her the importance of staying connected with others. As she remembers, "I struggled on a daily, almost hourly, basis to stay connected and I found myself distancing myself from others." She also refers to connection in describing her recommitment to stay in tune with her passions. "I had my horse, my passion for helping others and I had to learn to reconnect with the passion for my career."

## Connectedness

Beverly Beuermann-King, a wellness expert and upcoming speaker at the 2017 OVMA Great Ideas Conference, believes that social connectedness is essential in keeping everyone emotionally healthy. In a veterinary hospital, Beuermann-King understands the emotional stress staff can feel after an emotionally draining experience. She recommends, "a time when staff can share their feelings in a safe way – without being judged." By doing this, it lets people move forward from the emotional side of a situation. This is important because when people are highly emotional, it inhibits their problem solving abilities.

Cultivating social connections (outside of social media) benefits everyone. Those with extensive and strong support networks tend to have:

- Better physical health through lower rates of unhealthy behaviours (such as smoking, drinking and an inactive lifestyle)<sup>1</sup>
- Lower prevalence of mental illnesses<sup>2</sup>
- More job opportunities<sup>3</sup>

Being mindful of how you are feeling and taking the time to reflect on your thoughts is how to connect internally. Some people use meditation as their way to maintain this connection. "People are busy and can easily lose sight of what makes them happy or what they need if they don't take some time to think about it," says Beuermann-King.

## Managing Perfectionism

As a profession, most veterinarians would be considered to be perfectionists and high achievers. While this serves an individual well through school and in becoming a veterinarian, it can also be detrimental when sustaining a career as a veterinarian.

Beuermann-King encourages perfectionists and high achievers to be aware of their energy levels and take advantage of their down time outside of the practice, because the constant need to keep pushing through each

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day can result in burnout. "It's like if you keep revving a car engine over and over again. Eventually you have to do the maintenance or you risk the engine breaking down."

As a recovering perfectionist, Pope attributes her need to be perfect as what led her to her darkest moment. "I remember thinking how I worked so hard to get where I was, yet hated what I was doing and that something was wrong with me – that I must be a horrible person. I have failed." Pope now reminds herself to:

- Accept that she will disappoint some people (including herself)
- Learn and accept her limitations
- Know that her mistakes do not define who she is
- Accept that emotions are okay and should not be judged
- Recognize that she is not alone

Part of Pope's mission is to help veterinarians who are struggling emotionally to realize they are not alone and that it is normal to have these dark feelings. It is not about "being fixed", it is about being kinder to ourselves. This includes self-forgiveness – a challenge for Pope, who struggled to forgive herself when she felt she had let someone down. Overcoming this challenge led to the development of a mantra she often cites to her clients: "Forgiving yourself is the foundation to a sustainable career in veterinary medicine."

## Resiliency

Author Al Siebert, PhD claimed that, "highly resilient people are flexible, adapt to new circumstances quickly and thrive in constant change. Most important, they expect to bounce back and feel confident that they will." Psychologists agree that some people seem to be born with more resilience than others. However, they also assert that it is possible for everyone to cultivate more of it.

Training yourself to be more optimistic, and therefore resilient, involves turning around negative thoughts, being around more positive people, learning from challenges and taking care of yourself. Creating a life outside of work is paramount when it comes to recovering quickly from difficulties. Seek out activities you enjoy, or social circles where you have fun and share interests with others. Positive connections help you maintain a positive outlook when negative things happen.

For someone who is starting to feel like their world is unraveling, Beuermann-King recommends figuring out if the challenges are short-term or long-term. If it is a short-term issue, "Start doing something to move towards a solution and gain a sense of control," she continues, "but if it's a long term issue or if it continues to disturb your sleeping, eating or ability to take care of yourself, it's time to talk to someone – a friend or a therapist."

Today, Pope uses her personal experience to help other veterinarians as a life coach (*1Lifecc.com*).

The key to being resilient is to surround yourself with positive influences. She divides these influences into four categories: mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. What works is unique to each individual based on what brings them peace and happiness. Some may use exercise, meditation or deep breathing to connect them to a positive thought or place of happiness. For Pope, it was her horse.

1. Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health and Behavior, Health and Behavior: The Interplay of Biological, Behavioral, and Societal Influences (Washington (DC): National Academies Press, 2001).
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), 15-16.
3. L. Xue, Social Capital and Wages Outcome of Recent Immigrants to Canada (Ottawa: Government of Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). Also: N. Lin, Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



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