

Recognizing mental health challenges in practice and what to do next

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Over the past approximate 5 years, the concept of one's mental health has become more germane and present than ever in the veterinary field. It is difficult to go to a conference and not find some kind of mental health resource or presentation. Academic research has supported the need of organizations to focus on the mental health of their veterinarians. The most recent Merck Wellbeing study (2022) indicates that veterinarians are most concerned with stress levels in the profession, student debt, suicide rates among veterinarians and the shortage of veterinarians. The study found that serious psychological stress has increased in recent years while levels of suicidal ideation has remained stable. Other studies such as Nett (2015) and Tomasi et al. (2019) found that suicide ideation and death is a serious concern for the field.

In 2020, I heavily critiqued veterinary medicine's conceptualization of mental health. At the time, the actual need for a focus on mental health was grossly minimized (Tanguay, 2020). There were relatively few resources and most of them were severely inadequate. It seems that in the last several years, matters have improved. QPR suicide prevention trainings are marketed and provided at major conferences. Organizations host meaningful mental health trainings, webcasts etc. There is a focus on workplace culture and certifications to support better mental health of employees.

This training will focus on how to identify signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and illness in both oneself and others. AABP has received significant feedback from veterinarians on the importance of how to spot if a colleague is struggling and how to approach as well as potentially assist that colleague.

The current training will review the impact of mental health stigma as well as how to combat it. Stigma is the negative characteristics or views that are inappropriately associated with people with mental health challenges. It is a major barrier to people reaching out and acquiring proper help.

The current training will also review a variety of common mental health challenges and disorders and what you might observe. For instance, someone with major depression may withdraw socially, have changes in physical appearance, have great difficulty sleeping or sleep far more than typical, become consistently irritable, hopeless or down in mood. It takes skill and willingness to talk to this person. Genuineness, non-judgment, using I-statements as well as manufacturing a good time to visit with the person, are all important skills in addressing a concern you have. However, skill does not necessarily mean "success" here, which is hard for some people in the medical field to be okay with. Sometimes for someone who is struggling, the best you can do is genuinely and supportively convey your concern, then intentionally wait in the wings.

However, there are situations where "waiting" is not an option. There may be significant employment concerns or even more serious, safety concerns regarding that person. This training will also focus on suicide awareness and intervention relevant to a veterinary practice. It is a myth that there are always signs someone will attempt suicide. There are people who take their lives and show or communicate nothing or very little to others beforehand. At the same time, understanding warning signs and risk factors can help us prevent suicide in some instances. There are steps we can take to increasing safety.

Over the past 5 years, the veterinary field has embraced mental health. Like any field, there will unfortunately always be people who struggle. However, there is still room to grow in terms of arming veterinarians (especially when young) with an education about not just wellbeing, but mental illness and how to identify and assist appropriately.

References

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