



mind matters

A GUIDE TO
ENHANCING
WELLBEING AND
MANAGING WORK
STRESS IN THE
VETERINARY
WORKPLACE

INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDE

Psychological wellbeing at work is a focus of attention for the veterinary profession. In particular, we recognise the importance of addressing work-related stress to protect the wellbeing of the veterinary team. Work stress can affect physical and psychological health, and can also lead to poorer work performance, increased absenteeism and employee turnover. The ethical and business reasons for tackling work stress are clear.

This guide provides advice to veterinary workplaces, including clinical practices and other settings in which veterinary professionals work, on approaches to managing stress and promoting wellbeing. It is designed for everyone who has an interest in the wellbeing of the veterinary team, in particular practice managers, line managers or health and safety officers.

The guide begins by outlining the root causes

of work-related stress and the reasons why it should be addressed. We then describe a range of approaches to managing stress at work, and provide some suggestions for how these might be applied in veterinary workplaces. The guide finishes with advice on how to maximise the effectiveness of stress management initiatives in the workplace.

The guide has been developed by Dr Elinor O'Connor, Senior Lecturer in Occupational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, in association with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) Mind Matters Initiative (MMI), and is illustrated with examples from the three winning practices of the 2016 MMI/Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons Wellbeing Awards: 387 Veterinary Centre (Small Practice Category), Valley Vets (Medium Practice Category), and White Cross Vets (Large Practice Category). We hope that you will find the guide helpful for identifying steps to support wellbeing in your workplace.

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We would welcome your feedback on the guide, as well as examples of how your workplace supports wellbeing and seeks to tackle stress in veterinary work. Please email Lizzie Lockett at lizzie@vetmindmatters.org with your comments.

WHAT IS WORK STRESS?

“Common stressors include high workload, limited control at work, and conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations”

Well-organised work and a good working environment are beneficial for our wellbeing. However, even for those who normally enjoy their work, every job involves difficulties or less pleasant experiences at times. Stress occurs when the person feels that work demands exceed their capacity to deal with the situation.

Stress differs from work demands that we experience as challenging, but with which we believe we can cope; in fact,

these challenges can be motivating and help us to achieve our goals.

Sources of stress vary across different professions and occupations, but common stressors include high workload, limited control at work, and conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations. In addition, our personality characteristics and coping style influence how we respond to demanding situations at work and, in turn, the degree of stress we experience.

WHY SHOULD WORK STRESS BE ADDRESSED?

An RCVS survey of veterinary surgeons found that almost 90% reported that veterinary work is stressful (Institute for Employment Studies, 2014). Frequent or prolonged exposure to stressful situations at work can affect physical and psychological health and reduce job satisfaction and commitment. In the UK, stress is the second-largest cause of work-related ill-health diagnosed by general practitioners (Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 2016).

Effective stress management not only has benefits for workers' health and wellbeing, but there is also a clear business case for reducing stress. Work stress is associated with reduced performance and productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher employee turnover. In 2015-16, 11.7 million working days in the UK were lost to work-related stress (HSE, 2016). In addition, employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) to protect the health and welfare of workers, which includes managing hazards to psychological health.

HOW CAN WORK STRESS BE MANAGED?

Techniques for managing work-related stress have either an organisational focus, involving changes to the workplace or working practices to target sources of stress, or an individual focus, which involves strengthening people's resilience to stress. It is also useful to think about stress-management interventions in terms of what they seek to achieve. Some interventions aim to remove or reduce the cause of stress, some seek to reduce the impact of stress on the person, and some seek to support and rehabilitate people experiencing stress-related ill-health.

In practice, the interventions most often used for managing work stress are individual-level techniques, and research evidence supports their effectiveness. Organisational-level interventions can also be effective. However, there are relatively few 'off-the-shelf' versions of organisational-level interventions; these interventions usually have to be tailored to each specific workplace.

Finding solutions to work-related stress might seem challenging, however, in this guide, we



All staff at 387 Vets were asked to take personality tests, helping them to engage effectively and calmly with their colleagues

aim to describe some of the key principles for managing work stress, and make some suggestions for how you might apply them in your workplace.

Individual-level interventions

Individual-level interventions are designed to help people increase their resilience and to cope with stress at work. Some examples include mindfulness programmes, relaxation techniques, and training in specific skills such as time management.

- Mindfulness is increasingly being used as a technique for managing work-related stress. Research shows that mindfulness improves psychological wellbeing and reduces feelings of stress. The MMI mindfulness-based stress management programme is available from www.thewebinarvet.com. Other courses

- and structured programmes are available, including apps such as Headspace;
- Relaxation techniques for reducing stress include muscle relaxation and controlled breathing techniques. These techniques are straightforward to use, and research indicates that they can be effective in reducing feelings of stress;
 - Healthier lifestyle programmes that support exercise and better diet can also help with stress management and improve psychological wellbeing, such as the NHS's Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing guidance at: www.nhs.uk/wellbeing

For people experiencing prolonged or intense levels of stress, or who are experiencing stress-related ill-health, additional support measures can be helpful.

- Employee assistance programmes provide support and counselling for personal or work-related difficulties. For example, Vetlife offers free and confidential advice and support to veterinary professionals on a range of issues, including work-related stress and mental health concerns www.vetlife.org.uk
- Sickness absence support and return-to-work schemes are recommended for managing long-term sickness absence whether due to physical or psychological ill-health (long-term absence is usually defined as continuous absence for four weeks or more). Guidance on managing sickness

An RCVS survey of veterinary surgeons found that almost **90%** reported that veterinary work is stressful

(Institute for Employment Studies, 2014)

absence is available from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development at: www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/absence/factsheet

Organisational-level interventions

Organisational interventions aim to change the workplace or work practices to remove or reduce sources of stress at work. In this section, we describe some of the main sources of stress at work and offer suggestions on how they can be lessened.

Workload and work/life balance

Veterinary work can involve high workload, long working days, and working unsocial hours, including on-call working, all of which can affect wellbeing.

High workload

High workload, including unpredictable surges in workload from day to day, is a common feature of veterinary work. An important step in managing workload is to obtain accurate estimates of typical daily workload levels, including workload during peak and emergency periods, and to consider if the amount and pace of work are appropriate and whether staffing levels are sufficient. Key principles for managing workload are:

- Scheduling a variety of tasks with differing physical or mental demands during the working day can help to maintain people's alertness and reduce fatigue;
- It is best if demanding tasks are scheduled

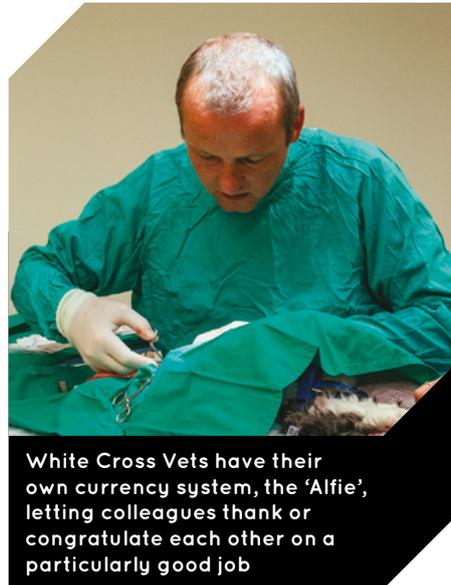
when people are less likely to be fatigued, for example, try to avoid scheduling them at the end of the working day, although it is appreciated that emergencies will come when they come;

- If possible, enable people to have a say in scheduling their duties, for example, attending consulting and operating periods;
- Encourage regular breaks during the working day and ensure that there are facilities for breaks to be taken away from the immediate place of work, ideally away from ringing phones or allowing a chance for some fresh air;
- Monitor individual colleagues' workload at regular intervals and revise their work allocation if appropriate.

In managing the impact of workload, it is important to consider not only staff numbers, but also the mix of experience and skills required to meet workload demands. An HSE guide on ensuring appropriate staffing levels, including advice on managing in circumstances of reduced staffing, is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/staffing-levels.htm

Working unsocial hours, including on-call working

'Shift working' is defined as on-call duties, work that is scheduled outside the hours of 07.00-19.00h, work periods of 12 hours or more, or rotating hours of work. Shift work, particularly where it involves early morning starts or working at night, can lead to fatigue,



White Cross Vets have their own currency system, the 'Alfie', letting colleagues thank or congratulate each other on a particularly good job

reliance on sedatives or stimulants, disruption of domestic and social life, and poorer work performance. Some good-practice guidelines for the design of work schedules that may be helpful for veterinary work are:

- When work demands concentration, is safety critical, or involves exposure to physical hazards to workers' health, it is preferable for shifts not to exceed eight hours;
- Ensure work schedules permit a minimum of 11 hours off between the end of one shift and the start of the next;
- Ensure schedules allow adequate rest time for those undertaking on-call duties. This is

"In managing the impact of workload, it is important to consider not only staff numbers, but also the mix of experience and skills required to meet workload demands"



White Cross Vets contributes to all of their team's gym memberships and Fitbits, and even created a White Cross Fitbit group to encourage participation

particularly important during periods when call-outs are more likely, such as lambing and calving;

- If possible, avoid 'split' shifts, as they tend to lengthen the working day;
- When people are switching from day to night working or vice versa, ensure that their work schedule incorporates a minimum of two nights' full sleep;
- If colleagues commonly 'shift swap', it is recommended that details are recorded and monitored to ensure that it is not resulting in insufficient rest time and increased fatigue.

A useful HSE guide for organisations on designing work schedules is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg256.pdf

Work demands and job conditions

By its nature, veterinary work involves a number of features that are potentially stressful, such as exposure to animal suffering, cases in which challenging complications occur, working with clients who may be upset or distressed, and lone working.

Where possible, changes to the workplace or working practices to remove or reduce risk associated with these demands are recommended (for example, protocols for lone working). In the case of stressful features of veterinary work that are unavoidable or difficult to target, such as exposure to animal suffering, it is appropriate to consider



In the UK, stress is the second-largest cause of work-related ill-health diagnosed by general practitioners

(Health and Safety Executive, 2016)

techniques for helping colleagues cope with these, such as specific training programmes (for example, dealing with compassion fatigue) or more general stress management methods (for example, mindfulness training).

Working with clients

Any job that involves interaction with clients can, at times, require workers to deal with

emotional, demanding or discourteous people. In veterinary work, potential client-related stressors can include animal owners' high expectations of vets and vet nurses, complaints, and exposure to verbal abuse or threatening behaviour.

- Training in working with clients can be beneficial for members of the veterinary

team who deal directly with clients, and a range of specialist training courses for working with veterinary clients are available;

- With regard to managing abusive and threatening behaviour specifically, guidance developed by the HSE can be found at: www.hse.gov.uk/violence/toolkit/customers.htm and: www.hse.gov.uk/violence/preventing-workplace-harassment.pdf
- Consideration could be given to a single point of contact for the handling of complaints.

Lone working

Lone working includes circumstances in which a person works alone at their usual workplace (for example, during out-of-hours work) or at other locations (for example, undertaking house calls and farm visits).

- A HSE guide on assessing and managing lone-working risk is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg73.pdf
- Information about lone-worker safety protocols and devices, and training for managers and lone workers on reducing lone-working risks are available from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust: www.suzylamplugh.org

Work relationships

Lack of social support and difficulties or conflict in relationships at work can be significant sources of stress at work. Key principles for



387 Vets provided compassion and bereavement training for the whole team

managing relationships at work are:

- Fostering positive relationships and social support not only removes or reduces a potential source of stress in its own right, but can also help people to cope with other aspects of their work that are stressful;
- Mentoring schemes and peer support groups can be helpful for developing social support within the team;
- Informal approaches to fostering social support can be effective; these are based on creating opportunities for people to spend time together and to develop relationships with each other. For example, ensuring that people can take

breaks together during the working day enables them to be a source of support for each other;

- Social events outside working hours can also foster positive relationships. However, try to ensure that people who might prefer not to participate do not feel obliged to attend. Similarly, consider a range of social activities, for example, events that are alcohol or food-based might not be appropriate for everyone;
- It is helpful to have in place measures for identifying and resolving difficulties or conflict in relationships at work and to ensure that people are aware of these. For managers, dealing with conflict in relationships at work can be challenging – and stressful – and specific training in this may be helpful;
- With regard to harassment and bullying specifically, it is helpful to have a clear policy stating that these are not acceptable and outlining how allegations of unacceptable behaviour will be managed. Useful guidance on reducing the risk of bullying and harassment, as well as dealing with them when they do occur, is available from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service: www.acas.org.uk;
- It is important to create an open and learning culture where team members feel they can discuss things that have not gone well in a non-judgemental environment, and the whole team can develop and improve systems as a result.



Valley Vets vary their outings as a team, arranging for group cinema viewings, speed boat outings, and summer barbeques

Personal and career development

Unclear performance expectations, 'role conflict', and concerns about career development are potential sources of stress at work. Key principles for addressing these are:

- Ensure that people know what is expected of them at work in terms of their responsibilities and the standards of performance required;
- Provide constructive feedback about performance. Feedback is most effective when it is timely and appropriately frequent (providing feedback only during an annual performance review might not be sufficient);
- Be aware of and address potential



role conflict; this can include conflict between the person's capabilities and the requirements of their role, or conflicting demands arising from different responsibilities within their role;

- Mentoring and supervision are beneficial not just for recently-qualified or new colleagues, but may also be helpful for

those taking on new roles at more senior levels or returning to work after a period of absence. In addition, mentoring can be good for the wellbeing of the mentor as well as the person being mentored;

- Veterinary workplaces usually fund and provide leave for continuing professional development (CPD), but it is important to

be aware of and address potential barriers to people undertaking CPD, such as high workload.

Control at work

Not having enough control over work matters is a common source of stress. Key principles for addressing this are:

- There are unavoidable constraints on how veterinary work is undertaken, but enabling people where possible to be involved in decisions about how work is organised and carried out is beneficial to wellbeing;
- Good communication is fundamental to people having a sense of control at work. It is helpful to have a number of communication channels in place, for example, meetings, newsletters, suggestion schemes etc. It is important that people are kept informed of what is happening at work, but communication should not just be 'top-down' from those in management positions; ensure that everyone is able to have a say;
- Change at work can be unsettling. In the event of change taking place, it is important to give people opportunities to ask questions and comment on what is happening;
- Team working can enable people to contribute to decision making. For example, when new projects arise, it is helpful if they are undertaken by groups rather than single individuals.

MAXIMISING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STRESS MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

Research has identified a number of factors key to the effectiveness of work stress management initiatives:

- Stress management is most effective when it is tailored to the specific organisation. This means identifying the sources of stress in your work, establishing who in the team might be affected by them, and deciding what approaches to targeting stress are most appropriate for your workplace;
- It can be helpful to use a number of stress management initiatives – perhaps a mix of organisational-level interventions or a combination of organisational- and individual-level approaches;
- Senior and middle management support for the importance of wellbeing at



Following an avoidable patient death at Valley Vets, the practice manager visited all branch sites to discuss the rationale for a change in procedures

work is key to ensuring that stress management initiatives are appropriately resourced and are implemented;

- Similarly, stress management measures are most likely to be effective when all colleagues have an opportunity to contribute to the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of wellbeing initiatives. A participative approach to stress management helps people feel involved, which can have a positive effect on wellbeing in its own right, and also increases the likelihood of the initiatives being accepted by all members of the team.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

To reduce stress and promote wellbeing at work, you do not need to implement all of the suggestions in this guide. Indeed, just one or two simple initiatives to support wellbeing at work can make a difference to psychological health.

A good example we have come across is a small animal practice that makes sure that the team has a shared lunchtime. Not only does this give colleagues a chance for a break and some food during the long working day, but it also enables them to offer a listening ear and be a source of support and advice for each other.

We hope this guide is helpful in identifying steps for supporting wellbeing and reducing stress in your workplace.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the sources of further advice listed throughout this guide, useful general resources relating to stress management and psychological wellbeing at work include:

- The Health and Safety Executive provides a comprehensive guide to assessing and managing stress at work: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards
- The mental health charity, Mind, provides guidance on supporting work colleagues who have mental health conditions: www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/useful-resources/
- The RCVS Mind Matters Initiative website has details of resources, including training courses, to support wellbeing in the veterinary profession: www.vetmindmatters.org
- The charity Vetlife offers a confidential, 24/7 Helpline which is available to any member of the veterinary team, and a Health Support Service: www.vetlife.org.uk
- The SPVS/MMI Wellbeing Awards website includes useful case studies and tips: www.vetwellbeingawards.org.uk





The Mind Matters Initiative is run by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
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