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WHAT IS RESILIENCE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER FOR VETERINARY STAFF?

From long working hours and occupational hazards, to the demands of rising client expectations, today's veterinary professional faces a variety of potential stressors. A growing bank of wellbeing research indicates that recurring exposure to stress can have a negative impact on our mental and physical health. As Southwick et al.¹ summarise: "When stress exposure is unusually intense, chronic, uncontrollable, and overwhelming, it can give rise to – or exacerbate – burnout, depression, anxiety, and numerous physical conditions, such as inflammatory, cardiovascular, or other medical illnesses."

Concerns about the impact of occupational stress have, in part, led to increased interest in the topic of resilience. Resilience is defined as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences."² The potential of resilience has been acknowledged within the veterinary profession. The UK's Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, for example, has added the concept to their Day One Competences (2014) for newly qualified veterinarians: "Veterinary surgeons need to be *resilient* and confident in their own professional judgements to withstand the stresses and conflicting demands they may face in the workplace."³

As understanding builds, it is now recognised that resilience is neither a personal trait nor a characteristic, but rather "a process to harness resources to sustain well-being."¹ A number of factors, both intrinsic (i.e. relating to us as an individual) and extrinsic (i.e. relating to the environment in which we operate) combine to give us an ability to thrive in the face of adversity. Individuals tend to be resilient at some times in their lives, and under some circumstances, but not under others. Research also indicates that several 'protective' factors exist which help us to mount a resilient approach. These include:^{1,4-5} having an adequate level of self-esteem, being able to cope with strong emotions 'in-the-moment', taking an optimistic viewpoint, having a sense of self-efficacy, and experiencing strong social support (with both emotional and tangible components). In contrast, 'vulnerability factors' decrease our ability to demonstrate

resilience, and these include:^{1,4-6} inadequate sleep/ hydration/ nutrition and the failure to meet other basic physiological needs, feeling isolated or 'apart' from others, lacking meaning in one's daily life/work, and incongruence between your values and those of your work colleagues.

Of particular interest to veterinary researchers and educationalists are the intrinsic protective factors for resilience, e.g. 'realistic optimism', adaptive coping strategies, and how these can be used to improve the veterinary professional's experiences following stressful circumstances.⁷⁻⁸

In this presentation we will explore the topic of resilience from the perspective of working in the veterinary profession. The session is suitable for all veterinary staff, including veterinarians, veterinary technicians and support staff.

References

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