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TEN TIPS FOR HAPPINESS

“Don’t worry, be happy!” In today’s society it has become commonplace to aspire towards happiness. Conversations about happiness now take place in a wide range of cultural, academic and socio-political circles, including veterinary medicine.¹⁻⁴ However, despite its intuitive simplicity, happiness remains a scientifically complex subject. There’s a lack of clarity over what, exactly, happiness is, and whilst the popular press exhorts us to ‘seek’ happiness,⁵ there are studies to suggest that such pursuits can, paradoxically, leave us feeling unhappier.⁶

To explore happiness, and how it might integrate with veterinary work, we can turn to the field of ‘positive psychology’. In the 1990s, psychologists like Martin Seligman and Chris Petersen led a departure from the ‘traditional’ remit of psychology, which often focused on dysfunctions of mental health, rather than wellness. The new branch of research, positive psychology, became the “scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive... founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.”⁷ It’s important to know that positive psychology does not refute the existence, or urge us to suppress, day-to-day negative emotions such as sadness or guilt but offers ways to work with these. (There are also times in life when we can experience more prolonged difficulties such as grief, bereavement or burnout, where we may need to seek professional support.)

Veterinary staff face a variety of stressors in their work, including long working hours, excessive workload, and problematic relationships with clients, which are thought to contribute to high levels of burnout and psychological distress.⁸⁻⁹ Is it possible that the negative experience of such stress can be offset by the development of innate happiness? The general (non-veterinary) research evidence has been promising. Thus far, studies have indicated that happiness can have multiple tangible benefits for individuals, including larger social rewards (stronger social support, richer social interactions) and better work outcomes (greater creativity, increased productivity, higher quality of work).¹⁰ In addition, a link between happiness and improved mental and physical health has been well-evidenced. As stated by Lyubomirsky and colleagues:

“Happy people are more likely to evidence greater self-control and self-regulators and coping abilities, to have a bolstered immune system and even to live a longer life.”¹⁰

But how can busy veterinary staff navigate the evidence base to identify ‘happiness tools’ that are both effective and relevant? One suggested resource is the UK’s “Action for Happiness”.¹¹ Action for Happiness is a non-governmental organisation which proposes the acronym GREAT DREAM as a useful mnemonic for ten research-based ideas for happier living:

- Giving: Helping others through donations of time, money or effort, e.g. voluntary work, has strong links with wellbeing. Where can we give more (but with care not to overextend ourselves)?
- Relating: Veterinary staff benefit from good working relationships with clients and colleagues, but are at risk from potentially isolating sole-charge work or toxic work environments.
- Exercise: Frequent, regular aerobic exercise has many benefits for mental as well as physical health, and long working hours can impact on this.
- Awareness: Hectic workplaces can put veterinary staff on ‘auto-pilot’. There are a variety of easy mindfulness and breathing techniques that can help veterinary staff to live more ‘in the moment.’
- Trying out: Learning new skills has been linked with happiness. It can be continuing education or something entirely unrelated to veterinary medicine.
- Directions: Having a direction or set of goals – personal or professional – to work towards has also been linked to a sense of happiness.
- Resilience: The ability to ‘bounce back’ back in the face of adversity is something that can be developed with the veterinary setting e.g. through learning adaptive coping skills.
- Emotions: Veterinary work can trigger positive emotions such as gratitude, inspiration, and joy. There are different techniques that can help staff to ‘savour’ positive experiences, and ‘surf’ more negative ones.
- Acceptance: An ability to accept ourselves, and the sometimes uncertain and challenging nature of clinical work, can help veterinary staff to navigate stressful situations.

- Meaning: The vocational nature of veterinary medicine can be a strong source of positive emotions for veterinary workers. It is important to link what you do each day to an overall sense of purpose.

In this presentation we will explore the topic of happiness from the perspective of working in the veterinary profession, and attendees will be supported to consider ways to improve their own innate levels of happiness. The session is suitable for all veterinary staff, including veterinarians, veterinary technicians and support staff.

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