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HOW TO KEEP THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR WORK, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PRIVATE LIFE

How often do you feel stressed, tired or exhausted as a direct result of working? Increasingly, vet practitioners are under pressure to keep up with consultations, clinical procedures, administration and now a new focus on engaging with social media. Emails, websites, blogs and social networking can all encroach on non-work time, reducing opportunities to rest and recover.

There is an extensive research literature in occupational psychology which highlights the importance of switching off and recovering from work. It has long been known that extensive and prolonged workload stress can lead to exhaustion and burnout. Hans Selye proposed the 'General Adaptation Syndrome' (GAS) as a model to account for this effect due to long-term stressors, which can be associated with highly pressured work environments⁽¹⁾. Stressors come in a variety of forms which we do not always automatically recognise. Most of us would probably be aware of physical stressors such as work environments where we have limited control over excessive noise and temperature or environments with poor ergonomic design leading to physical strain. Additionally, excessive workload, work-pace and schedules, which impact on our social and personal time, are all commonly recognised as stressful. However, we may not always be aware of the stresses associated with role ambiguity or conflict, where our expected professional performance is not congruent with our perception of our identity or personal values. Additionally, we may not recognise the strain 'emotional labour' may cause us in our day-to-day interactions with clients and colleagues which require us to use empathy to support others.

Any one of the stressors or their combinations can cause the physiological stress response associated with alarm (initial response), resistance (coping but still in a state of stress arousal) and exhaustion (burnout from long-term stress-associated arousal)⁽¹⁾. Exhaustion can have an impact at a physiological level in terms of detrimentally affecting health and well-being. There are many studies which have demonstrated the negative impact of exhaustion on, for example, sleep, mood, fatigue and physical health⁽²⁾. Not unsurprisingly then, exhaustion can impact on practitioner levels of

engagement and self-efficacy or the sense of ability to succeed and accomplish tasks, as well as leading to deterioration in memory, reaction time and task performance at the behavioural level⁽³⁾.

Research has highlighted the importance of recovering from work demands which strain psychophysiological systems leading to an imbalance. Non-work time provides an opportunity to recover and restore psychophysiological systems back to pre-demand levels⁽⁴⁾. Clearly, there are likely to be complex individual responses to work-related stress, including predisposition to work-related rumination, which can impact on sleep quality and recovery⁽⁵⁾. Additionally, people have different preferences for work 'flexstyles' in terms of whether they like to 'integrate' or 'separate' work and non-work time⁽⁶⁾. Therefore, understanding our strengths, preferences and vulnerabilities is important in planning for better work-life balance which can reduce work-related strain and exhaustion.

We can also make very practical changes in our daily routines which can support establishing boundaries between work and non-work time. These can involve exploring opportunities for implementing:

- space-based boundaries;
- time-based boundaries;
- psychological strategies, including behavioural approaches for managing technology; and
- communication skills to protect boundaries.

This presentation will briefly identify a number of key studies which highlight the role of different stressors in leading to burnout and exhaustion, as well as offer practical suggestions, based on empirical research, for developing work-life boundaries to promote self-care and recovery from work. The session is suitable for all veterinary staff, including veterinarians, veterinary technicians and support staff.

References

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