I can’t remember a time when pets were not part of my life. I grew up on a farm, and our animals were just as much a part of our family as the people. Today, I feel incredibly lucky and honored that my life revolves around pets and the people who love and care for them, in my professional life as the Program Manager for Veterinary Technician Training at Banfield Pet Hospital and as dog mom to my pack of five rescued pups: Jasper, Boxcar, Rocky, Poe, and Finn.

Supporting Emotional and Mental Health in the Veterinary Profession

Recognizing the signs of mental and emotional health problems in yourself and co-workers, as well as learning how to alleviate them, could greatly aid in increased wellbeing and productivity.

Abbie Hathaway, CVT, Banfield Pet Hospital, Vancouver, Wash.

Abbie’s career in veterinary medicine began nearly 12 years ago, following her undergraduate studies at the University of Southern California. After gaining experience in retail management, Abbie started as a veterinary assistant, then earned her veterinary technician credentials and evolved her leadership skills as a practice manager. In her current role as Program Manager of Veterinary Technician Training, Abbie supports current and aspiring veterinary technicians across Banfield Pet Hospital’s more than 1000 hospitals nationwide to help create healthy workplace environments and enable lifelong careers.
It is this same passion and unabashed love for pets that inspired me to become a veterinary technician. It is also what can make being a veterinary professional so difficult. We all entered this field because we want to help pets and the people who love them, but our emotional investment in pets’ health and wellbeing can take a significant toll on us.

Veterinary team members share experiences with pet owners: the privilege of sharing joy when their pets are thriving and sharing distress when their pet is unwell, in addition to sharing in their sadness when it’s time to say goodbye. These experiences are all privileges that the veterinary team shares, but can at times cause emotional upheaval for the caregiver.

When choosing this profession, we know to some extent that we will be part of the inevitable ups and downs of every pet’s life, but now is the time to start talking more openly about how the difficult aspects of our jobs can have serious consequences on our emotional wellbeing and mental health.

EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION: THEN AND NOW

For far too many years, mental health issues in the industry were rarely observed, and the topic was largely seen as taboo in day-to-day discussions. We all vaguely knew the term “compassion fatigue” when describing the emotional strain we felt for not being able to help and fix every pet or problem that came our way. However, it was rarely talked about. The veterinary profession did not have the appropriate language or tools to discuss the complexities of our emotional experiences. We were barely scratching the surface of a huge issue that continues to impact the profession to this day.

An area of particular concern for me is cyberbullying, in part due to the rise of social media and the ability to access people online. Cyberbullying has drastically changed the environment in which veterinary professionals work and amplifies the stress and anxiety the profession experiences daily. A study conducted in 2014 by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) found 1 in 5 veterinarians has been a victim or works with someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying in the workplace.1 The ability to air grievances and condemn veterinary team members and practices online worsens the situation. Online posts often escalate, sometimes leading to veterinary professionals receiving widespread backlash. This can range from verbal abuse to serious threats of physical harm for situations in which they may not have been responsible.

As a profession, we need to encourage each other to bring issues around cyberbullying, compassion fatigue, depression, and suicide into the public discussion—despite how uncomfortable, vulnerable and foreign this can feel. When we discuss our experiences openly and honestly, we unlock the opportunity to support one another and help move the profession forward. We need to encourage each other to seek professional support when needed, so we learn ways to manage the difficulties that exist in our chosen profession.

THE SEVERE IMPACTS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE, CYBERBULLYING AND MORE

As veterinary professionals, we have incredibly important jobs that come with intense feelings of responsibility. We made significant investments in our education and career because we are dedicated to the emotional gratification of our work. When cyberbullying occurs or compassion fatigue sets in, each of us begin to question our career choice and the value of being in the veterinary profession.

If this happens to you, it’s important to know that you are not alone. There are resources available. At Banfield, we realize the importance of prioritizing the health and wellbeing of our veterinary team members, and we have created a Health & Wellbeing team at our headquarters—including an in-house mental health professional—that is dedicated to addressing these issues head on, while continuing to share key learnings with the profession at conferences throughout the year.

Each and every one of us in the veterinary profession can make a difference by having open conversations, lifting each other up, and seeking education and resources that better position us for long-term careers doing what we love most: providing incredible pet care.

**References**