

**MEET THE AUTHOR**

Anna Santos, RVT
*University of Georgia
Veterinary Teaching Hospital*

5 Tips for Leading a Balanced Life

Wellness has become a popular word over the past few decades in veterinary medicine. Years ago, when I first started to hear this concept in our industry, I thought, “Of course I am well!” I had the best job as a veterinary nurse in a busy critical care unit at a major veterinary school. I was doing what I loved, I was learning new skills, and I was happy. But this moment in time took place before marriage, kids, additional degrees, job changes, aging parents, etc. In other words: before what I believe you would call “life” began.

Anna is a registered veterinary technician with 23 years of experience in veterinary medicine and academia. Anna is the supervisor of the University of Georgia Veterinary Teaching Hospital Small Animal Intermediate Care Ward and Small Animal Isolation. Anna also holds a BS in Animal Science and is currently pursuing an MPH in Disaster Management from the University of Georgia. Anna lives on her family farm in Athens, Georgia, with her husband Brian and her son Zeb, along with an ever-growing menagerie of farm and companion animals.

Jarom Vogel



As I progressed through my personal and professional life, I began to notice a lingering fear that I couldn't pull it all off. So, in true "vet med style," I pushed that thought aside and kept going. That's what you're *supposed* to do, right? Well, I was wrong. And you know those other buzzwords like burnout, self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and compassion fatigue? I quickly found out just how real those are.

I only make light of my professional and mental health struggles to humanize them. These issues are very real—not only for me, but for so many in our veterinary community. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that veterinarians are 2.1 (males) to 3.5 (females) times more likely to die by suicide than the general population,¹ noting that one of the main factors contributing to this trend is poor work-life balance. While there has been less research focused on support staff (i.e., veterinary nurses and veterinary assistants), there is data that points toward this same phenomenon occurring in these populations.²

Pursuing (and maintaining) personal wellbeing, self-care, and work-life balance can be overwhelming. Whether you are wading through the seemingly endless supply of information out there or trying to take the first step, keeping the path to conscious self-care can feel daunting at any leg of your journey. But take it from me: you can do it.

So, how do we live a balanced and meaningful life? There is no perfect recipe, but there are some proven areas on which you can focus. To help remind myself of these areas, I like to use the acronym RE-MAP. In utilizing these tools, you are remapping your brain to help progress toward a more positive, self-caring path.

- **Realistic Expectations (Boundaries)**

Professionally, many of us have a hard time setting boundaries. We take on too many patients, projects, titles, and hours. We allow coworkers to treat us disrespectfully, or maybe we do not treat our coworkers with the respect they deserve. We may not feed our bodies with nutritional foods or provide it with the correct amount of sleep. Establishing appropriate, healthy professional and personal boundaries is key to a balanced life. Learning to set healthy boundaries and expectations can be a hard thing to first learn and then implement. Maybe you are not even sure what those boundaries need to be. *Psychology Today* recommends starting with 4 areas.³ First, know your limits, then be assertive when stating those limits and boundaries. After your

boundaries are set, practice reinforcing them. And finally, if someone does not respect your boundaries it is okay to move forward without them. Your mental health and wellbeing are more important than anything. However you decide to implement your expectations and boundaries, I highly encourage you to stay engaged in this area through reading, professional counseling, and/or open communication with your team. And if you recognize a friend or colleague struggling with this, say something! It may mean more to that individual than you know.

- **Exercise**

For all of you rolling your eyes and thinking, "I am on the floor 13 hours a day; isn't that enough?" I am not talking about training for a marathon or hitting the gym for 2 hours a day. Research shows that exercising for as little as 30 minutes a day has significant benefits both physically and mentally.⁴ Remember, there is no perfect recipe. Your exercise plan can look however you want it to look. It can be a spin class, yoga, a walk in the woods with your dog, a ride on your horse, taking the stairs, or walking to the store. Find a routine that works for *you*. Time management and balance are always an issue when it comes to fitting in self-care. If you prefer a digital on-demand platform over going to the local gym or creating your own regimen, I found a few sites that I enjoy because they are inexpensive and have a variety of workouts for any level of fitness or time commitment, including Beachbody On-Demand ([beachbodyondemand.com](https://www.beachbodyondemand.com)) and Alo Moves ([alomoves.com](https://www.alomoves.com)).

- **Mentorship**

Some of you may be scratching your head on this one or doubting how it could fit into your busy schedule. It is as simple as this: give back, and it will make you feel better. Your time and mentorship can be spent or done anywhere—work, church, your child's school, the local shelter (human or animal). The point is to get out of your head and give your time to others. It allows for perspective and self-reflection.

- **Affirmation**

This is something in which I personally believe, but I have a hard time implementing this—and I suspect others may feel the same way. Have gratitude for yourself and the accomplishments in your life, and celebrate them! Give yourself some grace and remember, you are enough. If this is a struggle for you, just start simple. Try some meditation. Alo Moves offers guided meditations along with its fitness routines. If you are looking for something



Make sure your team is the definitive source for pet nutritional information and advice. The NAVC Pet Nutrition Coach Certification prepares you with knowledge and tools to communicate with clients and provide expert guidance on pet nutrition.

NAVC Certifications are now offered exclusively through VetFolio.

Get Certified Today at vetfolio.com/pages/certifications



FINAL THOUGHTS

free, the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center has guided meditation at uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations. If you are into podcasts, I recommend checking out Jay Shetty's *On Purpose* or something from Gabrielle Bernstein.

● Personal Growth

You may cringe when I use the words personal growth, thinking it involves a required stack of self-help books and weekly visits with a personal counselor. Although this is one way of looking at personal growth—and a very productive and positive way, I might add—it does not have to be like this. I like to think about personal growth as getting out of your comfort zone. I like to learn new things, so I decided to go to graduate school (you definitely do not have to go to that extreme). Ask if you can help out in a new area at work for a few days, try starting a new hobby, or read a book on a topic that is totally new but interesting to you. The goal is to expand yourself and open yourself up to new, exciting, and challenging ideas.

Balance and self-care can be difficult. As veterinary professionals, we have been indoctrinated to think that more must be done for everyone—patients, clients, and team members—before ourselves. We, as an industry, need a cultural shift in making personal balance and wellbeing a priority. RE-MAP can be a great beginner lesson in implementing a positive work-life balance that is easy to remember and share with others in the field. Take charge of your personal wellbeing because your coworkers and patients need the best you that you can be. **TVN**

Resources

- navta.net/page/wellbeingresources
- avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing
- nomv.org

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New Study Finds Higher than Expected Number of Suicide Deaths among U.S. Veterinarians. cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p1220-veterinarians-suicide.html. Accessed January 2021.
2. Witte TK, Spitzer EG, Edwards N, et al. Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among veterinary professionals from 2003 through 2014. *JAVMA* 2019;255(5):595-608. doi: 10.2460/javma.255.5.595
3. Psychology Today. 4 Ways to Set and Keep Your Personal Boundaries. psychologytoday.com/us/blog/romantically-attached/201608/4-ways-set-and-keep-your-personal-boundaries. Accessed January 2021.
4. Harvard Health Publishing. How much exercise do you need? harvard.edu/newsletter_article/how-much-exercise-do-you-need. Accessed January 2021.