



ENHANCING WORKPLACE CULTURE

Helping to Restore a Positive Workplace Culture

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In recent years, the field of veterinary medicine has faced a growing concern: the deterioration of positive workplace cultures and increased levels of burnout and compassion fatigue among veterinary professionals. A positive workplace culture is essential not only for the wellbeing of veterinary staff but also for the quality of care provided to animals.

THE PROBLEMS

Several factors contribute to the deterioration of workplace culture in veterinary medicine. The profession itself can be emotionally taxing, with long work hours, pressures of a demanding workload, emotional stress, and a prevalent lack of work–life balance. All of these factors contribute to burnout and compassion fatigue among veterinary professionals.

According to the most recent Merck Wellness Study, the causes of decreased wellbeing and undesirable work environments are multifactorial, including increased debt, staff shortages, and increased levels of psychological stress.¹ This has led to a decline in job satisfaction, strained relationships among colleagues, and an overall negative atmosphere in many veterinary clinics.

In fact, NAVTA’s most recent demographic survey (**FIGURE 1**) revealed that the veterinary nurse turnover rate is a staggering 30% to 50% and, unfortunately, the average amount of time a credentialed veterinary technician stays in the field is approximately 5 years.²

Additionally, the perception of the veterinary field as a “calling” rather than a job can create a culture where



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self-sacrifice is valorized, leading to neglect of one’s wellbeing, and the hierarchical structure within veterinary practices can hinder open communication and collaboration.

Power dynamics between veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and team members can result in a lack of psychological safety, where employees are hesitant to voice concerns or offer suggestions.³ This stifles innovation and prevents the sharing of valuable insights that could contribute to better patient care and a more positive work environment.

Wellness Issues Experienced²

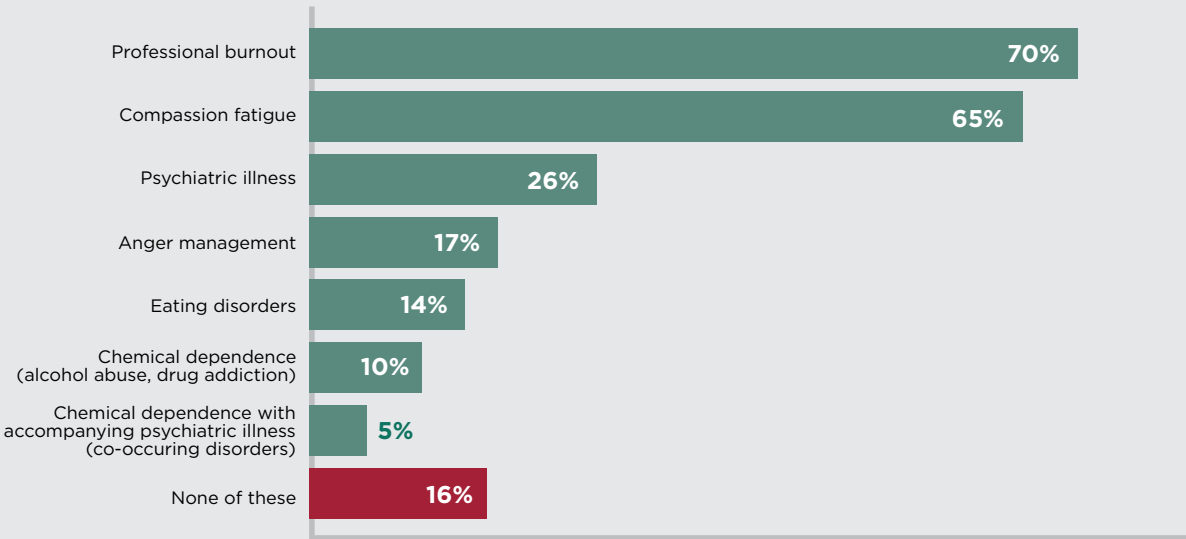


FIGURE 1. Veterinary nurse wellness issues experienced as reported from the results from the NAVTA 2022 Demographic Survey.



Creating platforms for regular team meetings and discussions can allow teammates and employees to express their concerns, suggest improvements, and feel heard.



THE SOLUTIONS

To restore a positive workplace culture in veterinary medicine, a multifaceted approach is required.

First, it is necessary to identify the difference between burnout and compassion fatigue. *Compassion fatigue* is a physiological process in which a loss of empathy is exhibited due to an emotional and physical condition created by the trauma of helping others in distress. *Burnout*, however, is a process in which stressors in the workplace, such as personnel conflicts or a lack of control, cause severe emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion, a lack of interest, reduced performance, irritability, or depression. Burnout is documented to affect approximately 70% of veterinary staff.² The distinction between these is crucial so that these issues can be properly addressed. Recognizing the signs of burnout and providing avenues for seeking help can destigmatize mental health struggles, encourage early

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intervention, and increase levels of camaraderie within the veterinary team.

Veterinary nurses can work with clinic leadership personnel to restore or maintain a positive workplace culture by taking the following steps:

1. Maintain Open Communication

Communication is paramount in fostering a positive workplace culture. Creating platforms for regular team meetings and discussions can allow teammates and employees to express their concerns, suggest improvements, and feel heard. Regular team meetings, suggestion boxes, and 1-on-1 check-ins with lead veterinary nurses and practice management can foster open dialogue. By encouraging feedback and valuing diverse perspectives, veterinary clinics can break down hierarchical barriers and create a more inclusive and collaborative environment.

2. Implement Mentorship Programs

Senior veterinary nurses, with the help of practice leaders, can provide guidance and support to younger colleagues, helping them navigate the emotional challenges of the profession. This can also facilitate knowledge transfer and skill development, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among team members.

3. Foster a Culture of Continuous Learning

Senior veterinary nurses can provide opportunities for professional development and training to newer veterinary nurses and assistants, which can empower employees to expand their skills and stay updated on the latest advancements. This not only benefits individual growth but also contributes to the clinic's reputation as a place of excellence in animal care.

4. Recognize and Celebrate Achievements

Acknowledging the hard work and dedication of veterinary professionals through regular appreciation events or awards can boost morale and create a sense of belonging. This can range from simple verbal appreciation from a teammate to formal recognition programs, awards, or bonuses from practice leadership. Feeling valued and appreciated encourages employees to invest in the success of the clinic and their colleagues.

5. Promote Work-Life Balance

Encourage colleagues to maintain a healthy balance between work and their personal life. Work with practice leadership to develop an on-call schedule for

emergencies and ensure all employees have adequate time for self-care by avoiding excessive overtime and supporting flexible scheduling, when possible.

6. Establish Clear Values

Clearly define the values and principles that guide your organization by discussing this as a team with hospital management. Ensure that these values align with a positive and respectful workplace culture and communicate them consistently.

7. Address Conflict Promptly

Conflict is natural in any workplace, but unresolved conflicts can poison the work environment. Address issues promptly and professionally, promoting healthy resolutions.

8. Encourage Feedback

Provide regular opportunities for colleagues and/or employees to give feedback on their experiences and suggest improvements. Act on this feedback to show that their voices are valued.

SUMMARY

Restoring a positive workplace culture requires intentional efforts and commitment. Remember, restoring a positive workplace culture is an ongoing process that often requires commitment from leadership and active participation from all employees. However, massive improvements can be made to the practice culture by utilizing the above tips on an individual level. By prioritizing the wellbeing of your team, addressing burnout, promoting open communication, fostering mentorship, encouraging continuous learning, and recognizing achievements and professional needs of veterinary professionals, the field can regain its reputation as a place of compassion, collaboration, and excellence. **TVN**

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