

# Identifying and Addressing Burnout in the Veterinary Profession

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## Abstract

It has been estimated that around half of veterinarians are experiencing symptoms of burnout, and according to the most recent Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study, veterinarians were more likely to experience burnout than physicians despite fewer hours worked. In this seminar, we will discuss research findings regarding burnout within the veterinary profession including incidence of burnout and proposed causes. You will learn to recognize the symptoms of burnout in yourself and others as well as some individual and organizational strategies to reduce burnout within the veterinary profession.

## Learning Objectives

1. Discuss research on burnout within veterinary medicine including incidence & proposed causes
2. Recognize symptoms of burnout within yourself and others
3. Discuss individual and organizational strategies to mitigate burnout within the veterinary profession

## What is Burnout?

Burnout high among veterinarians and is defined as a **psychological syndrome that occurs due to prolonged response to chronic stress on the job.**<sup>1</sup>

### Symptoms<sup>2</sup> (see Table 1)

- **Exhaustion:** feeling emotionally overextended, wearing out, loss of energy, depleted, and fatigued by your work
- **Cynicism:** feeling of irritability, negative, indifference, or distant attitude towards your work, patients, or clients
- **Inefficacy:** feeling ineffective at work, being a failure, not competent, low morale, inability to cope, and lack of successful achievement at work

### Impacts of Burnout in Veterinary Medicine<sup>3</sup>

- Increased medical errors
- Lower quality of patient care
- Lower well-being
- Poor physical health
- Employee turnover
- Decreased productivity

## Causes of Burnout

- Burnout caused by chronic stress on the job
- Stress levels higher for veterinarians than the general population and early-career veterinarians have the highest levels of stress<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- Many stressors in veterinary medicine including conflict, ethical dilemmas, student debt, inadequate support, making mistakes, discrimination, client behaviors and interactions<sup>4,5,7,8</sup>
- Other causes include work overload, lack of control, insufficient recognition and reward, poor relationships at work, lack of fairness, values conflicts, ethical dilemmas<sup>2,9</sup>

**Table 1. Work-related Burnout Symptoms, Causes, and Prevention**

<b>Burnout Symptoms</b>	<b>Burnout Causes</b>	<b>Burnout Prevention</b>
Exhaustion Cynicism- indifferent, negative Inefficacy- lack of accomplishment	Work overload Lack of control Insufficient recognition and reward Poor relationships at work Lack of fairness Values conflicts Ethical dilemmas	Change work patterns Coping skills & professional development Relaxation strategies Build workplace community Social support Self-care Seek professional help

## Research Updates Regarding Burnout

- About half of vets experienced at least moderate symptoms of burnout<sup>10, 11</sup>
- Over half of veterinary technicians experiencing burnout<sup>12</sup>
- Higher rates of burnout than physicians despite fewer hours worked<sup>13</sup>
- \$1 billion in estimated loss in annual revenue due to burnout in the veterinary profession<sup>11</sup>

## Organizational Strategies<sup>12,14</sup>

- ❖ Acknowledge/Assess the Problem
  - Maslach Burnout Inventory, Mayo Clinic Well-being Index, or ProQOL Assessment
- ❖ Harness Leadership Power
  - Leadership training and development and regular assessment by the team
- ❖ Implement Targeted Interventions
  - Interview the team and determine 1-2 greatest concerns and create solutions
- ❖ Build Workplace Community
  - Peer support, mentorship, and regular debriefing
- ❖ Identify Shared Values & Strengthen Culture
  - Team building, candid and open communication, safety and inclusivity
- ❖ Promote Flexibility and Work-Life Integration
  - Flexible work schedule, vacation time
- ❖ Provide Wellbeing Resources
  - Professional development, employee assistance program, spaces for self-care

## UT Veterinary Social Work Veterinary Wellbeing Debrief

1. What situations made it hard to sleep or put aside thoughts of work when at home?
2. What did you do well in that situation?
3. What do you wish you had done differently?
4. What did you learn?
5. Is there anything you are grateful for in this situation, or just in general?
6. Do you remember anything that was humorous about this situation or in this week?

## Individual Strategies<sup>2</sup>

- ❖ Change work patterns
- ❖ Boundary setting
- ❖ Coping skills
- ❖ Build workplace community
- ❖ Social support
- ❖ Self-care
  - Individualized
  - Does not have to be large to be effective but must be consistent
  - Sleep, exercise, nutrition, healthy relationships, boundaries, recreation & hobbies, nature, downtime, volunteering, mindfulness, gratitude, self compassion
- ❖ Counseling or therapy

## Resources

1. AVMA Wellbeing Resources  
[www.avma.org/wellbeing](http://www.avma.org/wellbeing)
2. Veterinary Mental Health Initiative  
<https://www.shanti.org/programs-services/veterinary-mental-health-initiative/>
3. A to Z Self-Care Handbook for Social Workers and Other Helping Professionals
4. Coping with Stress and Burnout as a Veterinarian by Dr. Nadine Hamilton
5. Vet to Vet Coaching with Dr. Ginger Templeton
6. MentorVet: an evidence-based mentorship and professional development program that has shown to decrease burnout in the early veterinary career  
[www.mentorvet.net](http://www.mentorvet.net)

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