


**Merck Animal Health  
Veterinary Wellbeing Study**  
Linda K. Lord, DVM, PhD



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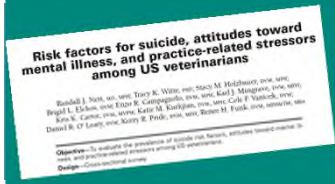
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### Background & Purpose



Recent publications suggest that veterinarians have a high level of mental distress and elevated suicide rate

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### Background & Purpose

- High levels of student debt combined with modest incomes have created serious enough concerns that AVMA conducted a major symposium on solutions
- Numerous reports of compassion fatigue and burnout exist in the profession

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## Goals

-  Definitively quantify the prevalence of mental illness and stress in the veterinary profession
-  Compare to previous studies and general US population

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## Objectives

-  Determine levels of mental health and wellbeing using standardized tools with a representative sample of veterinarians
-  Identify at-risk segments and contributing factors
-  Suggest organizational and personal remedies and interventions if needed

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## Research Team

    	<p>Ulrich Schimmack, PhD, University of Toronto</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Psychologist and wellbeing expert</li></ul> <p>Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW, University of Tennessee CVM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Licensed clinical social worker working in a veterinary setting</li></ul> <p>Linda Lord, DVM, PhD, Merck Animal Health (MAH)</p> <p>Colin Siren, Kynetec Market Research</p> <p>John Volk, Brakke Consulting</p>
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## Methodology

- ❖ AVMA:
  - 20,000 randomly selected email addresses
  - Email letter alerting sample to upcoming study
- ❖ Email invitation + 2 reminders
- ❖ Incentive: Drawing for 20 \$100 gift cards; contribution to AVMF
- ❖ Survey open Nov 2-16, 2017
- ❖ Average survey length 18.1 minutes.
- ❖ 3,540 usable, completed responses (17.7%)
- ❖ Data weighted based on age, gender and region of the US
- ❖ Margin of error +/- 1.62% at 95% confidence level

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## Two Key Measures

1. Serious psychological distress
  - i.e., Mental Health
  - Measured by standardized “Kessler 6” questions



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## Two Key Measures

2. Wellbeing
  - Wellbeing examines the way individuals think and feel about their lives compared to the best/worst possible lives they can imagine.
  - Measured and indexed using standardized questions
    - *How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*
    - *Suppose that the top of the ladder below represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. Where are you on the ladder?*
    - *Please indicate your agreement with the following statement: “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.”*

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## Many Factors Explored

- Student debt
- Stage of career
- Overall financial health
- Work-life balance
- Unnecessary euthanasia
- Practicing v. non
- Personality

- Relationships
- Involvement in healthy activities
- Involvement in unhealthy activities
- Attitude towards profession

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## Results Benchmarked

- General population**
  - Mental Health and Wellbeing:
    - Panel Study of Income Dynamics, University of Michigan
  - NESARC-III, NIH
    - Suicide ideation and attempts, US adult population
  - Omnibus study
    - Questions regarding career recommendation
- Veterinarians**
  - Nett, R. J. *et al.* “Risk factors for suicide, attitudes toward mental illness, and practice-related stressors among US veterinarians,” JAVMA 2015
  - Others

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## Debt, Stress, Suicide Top Concerns

Among 11 tested

Concern	Critically Important	Moderately Important	Minor Issue	Not an Issue	DK/NS
High Student Debt Levels	67%	24%	5%	2%	2%
Stress Levels of Veterinarians	53%	37%	9%	1%	0%
Suicide Rate Among Veterinarians	52%	29%	11%	2%	6%
Ability to Retire Comfortably	45%	37%	13%	4%	4%

Below are several issues you may or may not consider to be significant challenges faced by the veterinary profession today.  
Base: All Respondents (n=3,543)  
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# Mental Health

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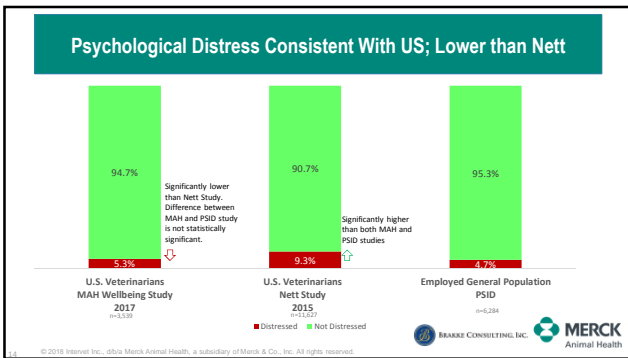
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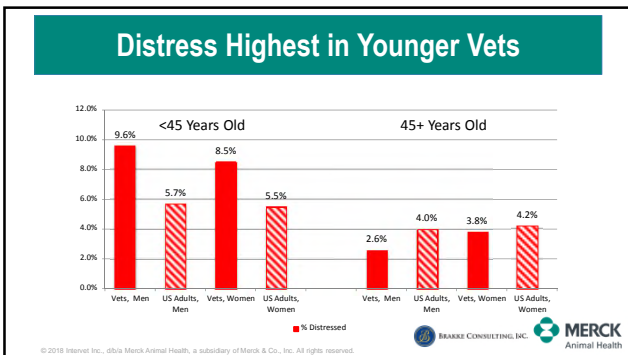
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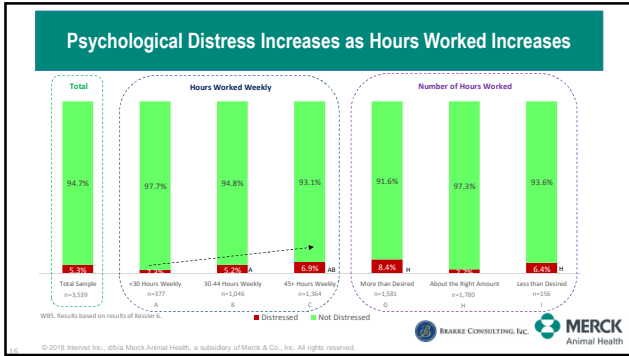
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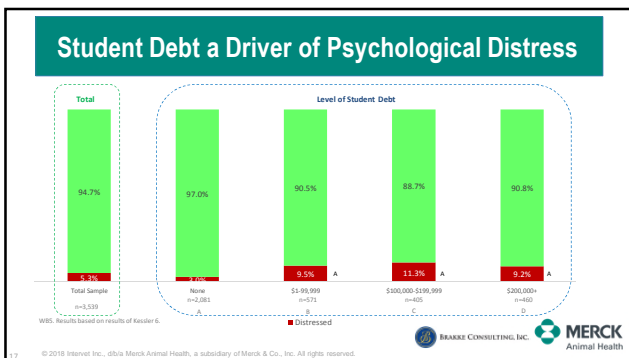
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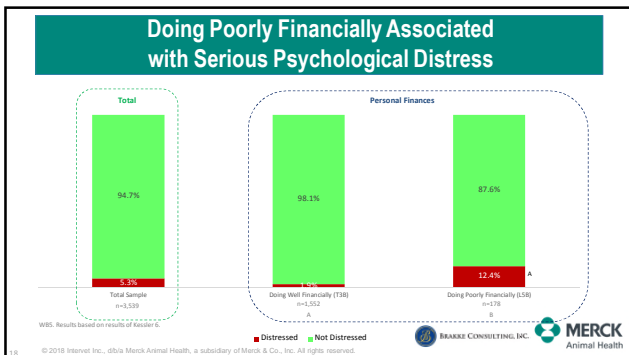
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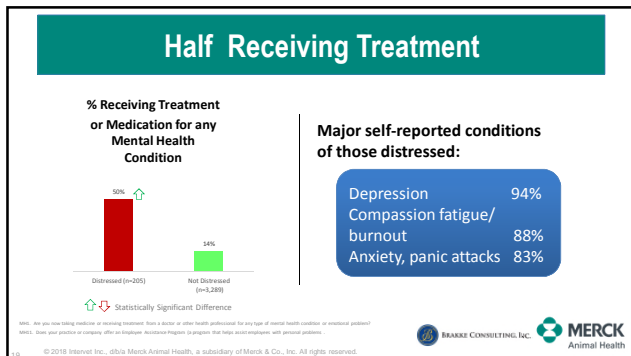
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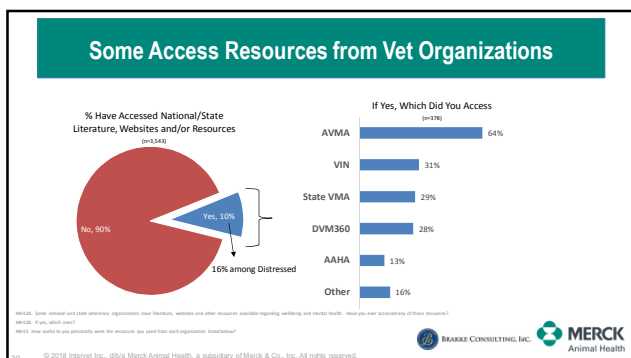
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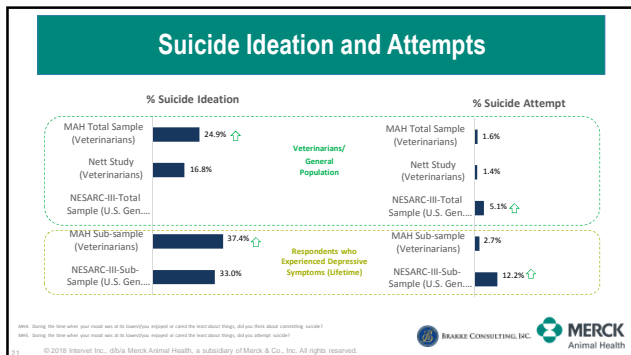
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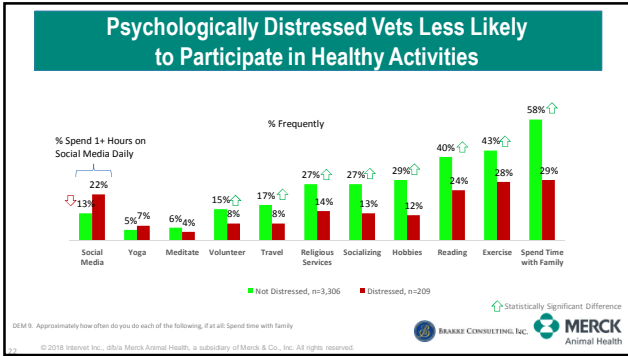
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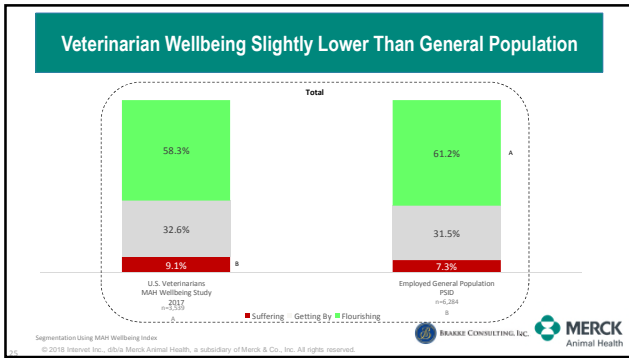
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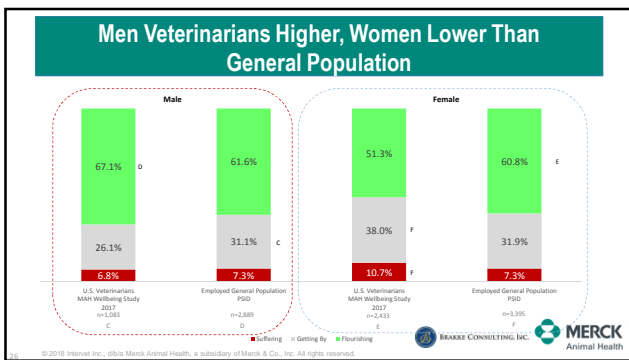
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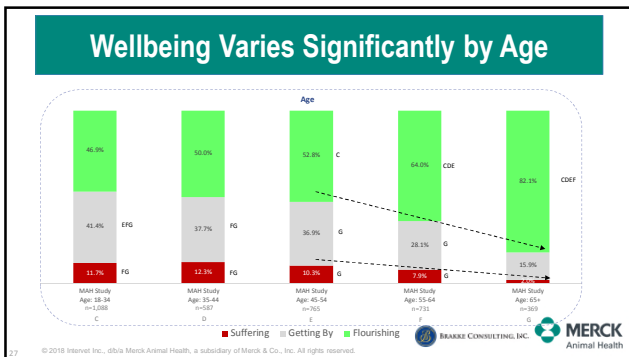
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### Age v. Gender

Among veterinarians under 45 – and 65+ – differences in wellbeing of men and women not statistically significant

Among veterinarians age 45-64, men on average exhibit higher levels of wellbeing than women

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### Hours Worked Dramatically Impacts Wellbeing

**Total**

Total Sample (n=328)

**Hours Worked Weekly**

30-32 Hours Weekly (n=122)  
30-44 Hours Weekly (n=146)  
45+ Hours Weekly (n=159)

**Number of Hours Worked**

More than Desired (n=283)  
About the Right Amount (n=25)  
Less than Desired (n=20)

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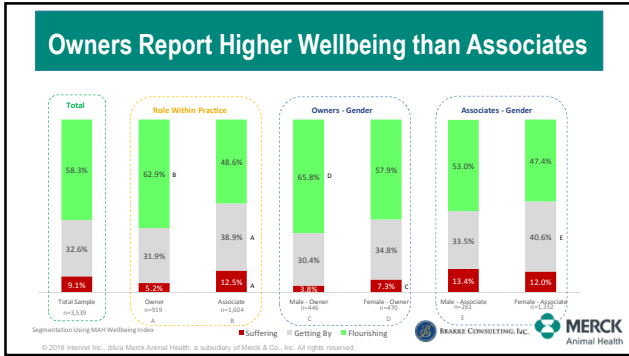
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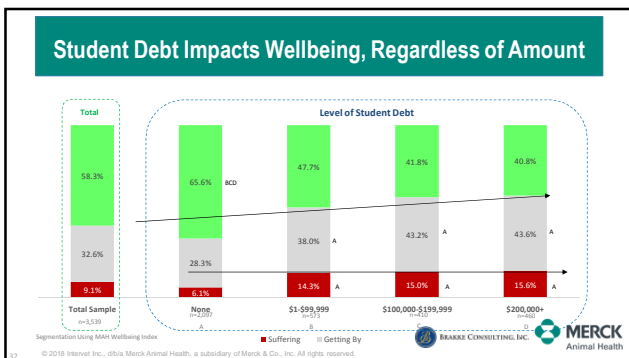
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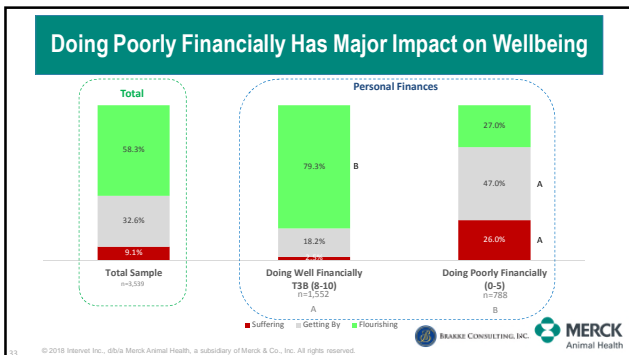
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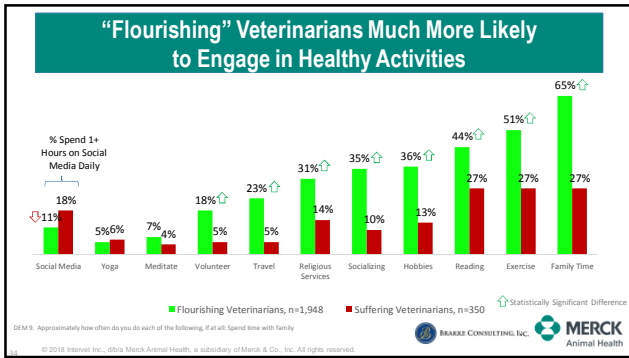
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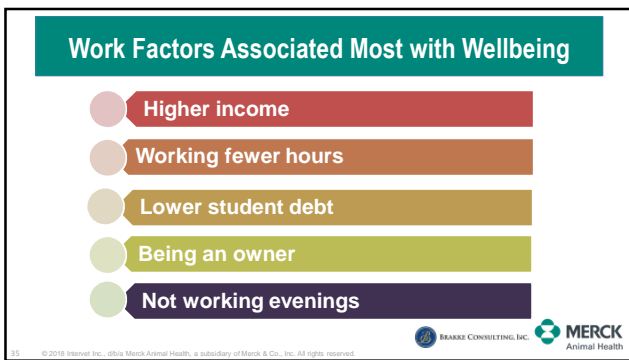
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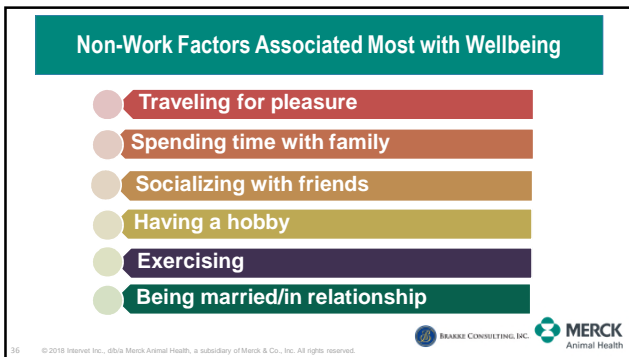
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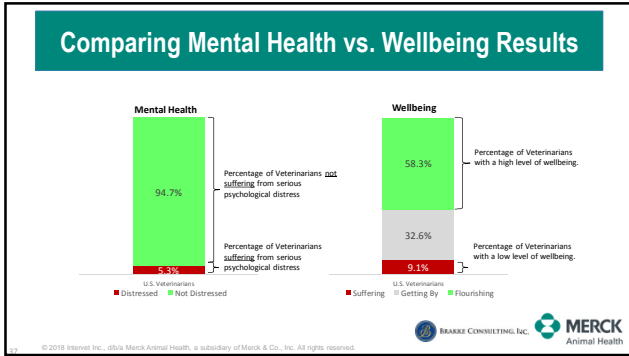
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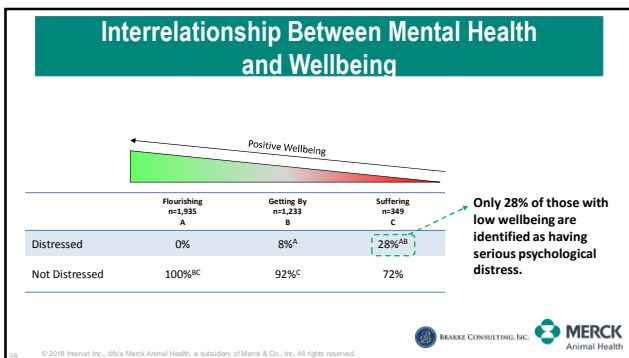
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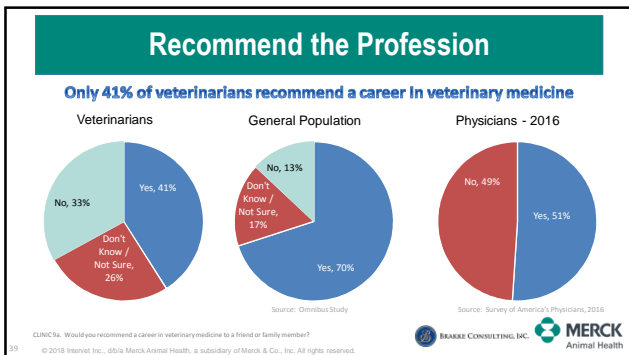
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## Conclusions & Recommendations

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### Conclusions

Veterinary Medicine is not in a state of crisis. About 1 in 20 veterinarians are suffering serious psychological distress, consistent with what is found in the general population.

Significant challenges exist, however, particularly with younger veterinarians

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## Conclusions

Some serious psychological distress is associated with non-work-related attributes. However, student debt, income and some work-related factors are strongly associated with psychological distress.

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## Conclusions

Those with serious psychological distress and poor wellbeing are far more likely to spend more time on social media and less time on healthy activities (e.g., time with family and friends, recreation, exercise).

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## Conclusions

There's a mental health treatment gap in veterinary medicine. While many veterinarians with serious psychological distress are getting treatment, a significant population is not. Few employers offer Employee Assistance Programs.



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### Conclusions

Veterinarians as a whole have slightly lower levels of wellbeing than the general population. Interestingly, older, more experienced veterinarians as a group experience higher levels of wellbeing than the general population.

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### Conclusions

Contributing to low wellbeing:

- Student debt
- Low income
- Working long hours
- Relief work

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### Conclusions

Contributing to high wellbeing:

- Marriage/relationship
- Socializing with friends
- Satisfactory family life
- Engaging in healthy activities
  - Exercise, travel, hobbies

Job satisfaction, where it exists, is a stronger predictor of wellbeing than in the general population

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**Conclusions**

Veterinarian do not strongly endorse the profession, even many that score high in wellbeing and mental health.

Reasons:

- Low incomes,
- High student debt
- Personal toll the profession takes
- Poor work-life balance

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**Recommendations**

More could be done to promote wellbeing, create awareness of mental health issues and help those at risk find acceptance and treatment.

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**Recommendations**

**Veterinary Organizations**

- Educate constituents about signs, symptoms and rates of mental illness among veterinarians
- Reduce barriers to seeking help:
  - Develop a national hotline where those who are distressed can find counseling and other help.
  - Provide and require veterinary CE in the skills of emotional crises management and suicide prevention

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**Recommendations**

**Veterinary Organizations**

- Reduce barriers to seeking help:
  - Establish peer to peer support networks for mental health
  - Engage innovative tele-behavioral health solutions to make access to mental health care more flexible, inexpensive, and time efficient.

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**Recommendations**

**Veterinary Organizations**

- Evaluate, improve and more effectively publicize existing organizational wellness resources
- Continue to seek ways to reduce student debt and improve financial conditions in the profession, especially for young veterinarians.

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**Recommendations**

**Veterinary Colleges**

- Require students to develop and engage stress management behaviors while in school.
- Continue to expand scholarship opportunities for students
- Extend services of veterinary mental health professionals to alumni

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**Recommendations**

**Employers**

- ▶ Educate employees on the existence of mental health issues and provide time off for appointments with physicians and counselors
- ▶ Outwardly discuss and set healthy practice expectations for work/life balance

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**Recommendations**

**Employers**

- ▶ Create mentoring programs for new employees to help them gain the skills and confidence needed to perform satisfactorily in their career
- ▶ Consider partnering with in-practice veterinary social work professionals

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**Recommendations**

**You**

- ▶ With the help of a mental health professional or coach develop a stress management plan
- ▶ Budget time for healthy activities such as family time, socializing with friends, recreation and exercise
- ▶ Retain a certified financial planner to develop a plan to manage finances and student debt

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## Recommendations

### You

- Limit social media time to an hour per day or less
  - Take periodic “sabbaticals” from social media
- Be vigilant for signs of psychological distress in yourself and others; seek help or encourage others to seek help
- Show support for others’ efforts towards wellness
  - (i.e. “Good job getting out of the clinic at 5:15 today!”)



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## For More Information

<http://www.vetwellbeing.com>



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Thank you!



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