JumpStart Special Edition: Check Up From The Neck Up

**Healthy bodies, healthy minds**

*Please reference - By Terra Shastri, Director of Business Development and Strategic Initiatives with the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association*

Encouraging your team members to focus on their mental health and well-being helps them personally and professionally. We know the veterinary profession is prone to burnout and compassion fatigue, so it’s important to create a supportive work environment. When staff feel good coming to work, they continue coming to work.

The past year has pushed many team members to their limits because they were managing their essential role in animal health, while also dealing with the anxiety and stress brought on by the pandemic.

It’s not enough to talk about it behind closed doors or to mention it at team meetings. Taking action speaks volumes, and the work environment can have a tremendous impact on a person’s journey to taking care of themselves.

Protecting the mental health and safety of staff can start with a few steps:

* Designate a “safe room” where staff can go to step away. A quiet space to collect themselves and take time for themselves can give them the opportunity to decompress and to be able to continue working.
* Encourage employees to take their days off. Many people have been working long hours, which makes the time that they do take off that much more critical to both their mental and physical health.
* Ensure those in leadership are taking time off and being a role model for positive coping strategies. Leadership needs to set a good example. Not only will it help them protect their own physical and mental health and ensure that they can stay strong during this time, it also demonstrates to their employees that everyone needs time to rest.
* Let your employees know where they can get help if they need it. This has been a challenging year for many people, but even more so for those who are worrying about financial security, health and family. Let your employees know that they are not alone, and there are people who they can talk to. Consider extending OVMA’s Member Assistance Program benefits to your staff. It costs marginally more than buying them a cup of coffee each month and provides them with 24/7 support. For more information, visit ovma.org/veterinarians/your-wellbeing/MAP. OVMA’s i-matter.ca website also has some great resources.

Encouraging well-being in the practice can help staff incorporate what works for them into their daily lives.

* Start a Monday meditation. Yes, Mondays are often a busy day in the practice, which means it’s also an overwhelming day for staff. According to *Scientific American*, long-term consistent meditation practices increase resiliency to stress, improves mental heath and increases compassion. If a two- to three-minute meditation can’t be done as a team at the start of the day, then encourage staff to download a mobile app (e.g. Headspace, Calm) and do a short meditation before they start their shift. Chances are, they will feel much better and start using meditation as a regular part of their routine.
* Create a wellness bingo card (myfreebingocards.com) where different activities are listed such as: list three things you’re grateful for today, take a 10-minute brisk walk, take a bath, read a chapter of a book. Once they complete a row, they receive a small prize.
* Provide healthier food and snack options. While everyone loves pizza and candy, there are plenty of healthier options available. Bring in a fruit or vegetable tray or try out a new recipe and then bring it in to share with others. Some people think healthy food tastes bad, but when they try it, they tend to enjoy it and feel better.
* Walk and talk. Instead of holding some of the smaller department or one-on-one meetings in an area in the clinic, go for a walk instead. Bundle up and get moving outside to have discussions— it will give everyone a boost of energy and they will go back to work feeling more refreshed.
* Assess ergonomics around workstations. Ergonomics is the science of designing work tasks (and workspaces) in a way that limits stress on the human body. For those working on computers, this means keyboards designed to minimize the risk of repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel, screens that minimize eye strain and chairs that minimize back pain. An online [assessment tool](http://www.computingcomfort.org/create1.asp) (computingcomfort.org/create1.asp ) can help point you in the right direction.
* Bring in a physiotherapist (virtually). Discuss the common positions staff may be in on a regular basis for tasks such as surgeries or when dealing with animals. The physiotherapist can help design a stretching program, so these regular positions don’t lead to injuries.
* Celebrate “Wellness Wednesday”. The middle of the week is a great day to get your staff to try new activities that encourage well-being. It can be somethings simple like a breathing exercise or a short workout video on YouTube. Team members can incorporate what they enjoy into their daily routine.

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