

Preventing the internalization of external stressors

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The opportunity for stress is always available. Exposure to virtual information and content can make it challenging to focus on what matters most—our personal health and happiness.

Did you know that Statista [reports](#) “Americans spend around 347 minutes per day with traditional media, along with 470 minutes of digital media”? This is a substantial amount of time to be intaking information that can affect your mental well-being. We also have to be aware that this is only one external factor that can amplify stress. Additionally, you must consider natural daily stressors that include your work and home life.

It is imperative that we evaluate the source points of our stress, develop mechanisms to release what is out of our control and effectively process the remainder.

Coping strategies: emotional and problem-focused

Unprecedented times call for unprecedented responses. Many of us have noticed in the past few years that our traditional coping strategies are falling short of the comfort they once provided.

Psychotherapist Amy Morin explains in her article “[Healthy Coping Skills for Uncomfortable Emotions](#)” that there are two kinds of coping skills: “emotional-focused” and “problem-focused.” Problem-focused coping skills are hands-on, including things like “make a to-do list” and “establish healthy boundaries.” These are helpful when situations are in your area of control. Emotional-focused coping skills, however, are for situations with more active complexities that don’t have immediate or obvious solutions.

Working in the veterinary community, you are faced with even more complexity because you're already dealing with heightened stress from multiple sources. As a veterinarian, you deal with the same pressures in day-to-day life that we all face, yet you are treating beloved pet family members and assisting owners who are often in an emotionally driven state. Emotional- and problem-focused coping skills become even more imperative in this environment.

Coping skills must start with intention. It is important that even in emergent situations you give your mind a moment to process. This enables you to have a clear mind to complete the task at hand. This isn’t the end of the work though. When the crisis or stress point passes, it is imperative that you apply healthy coping skills to effectively process the elements of your day.

Each individual’s emotional-focused coping strategies will be different, but naming the source of discomfort is the first step in reconciling the complex emotions often associated with our environment.

Safety of the self

Having a desire to help others can be a natural instinct that is both positive and negative. When we hear about tragedy or need, our immediate natural instinct is to feel a sort of “activation” toward being of assistance. We can’t be everywhere at once, and many larger issues are out of our immediate control.

Individuals working in the veterinary field face an even greater challenge by holding the well-being of a client’s source of comfort in their hands. The residual stress of that alone is an external stress point that affects not only the job, but the entire scope of the profession. The greatest source of clarity comes from prioritizing ourselves before the issue and trusting in our expertise to guide us in the right direction.

Asking ourselves if WE are okay, if WE are getting the things WE need, is an effective way to identify stressors in our lives that we CAN control and solve those issues as a way to cope with events that surround us.

Even in a professional environment, you have to prioritize your overall health and well-being. That may mean taking a moment between challenging cases to process, release and reset. Taking 10 minutes to step aside in the grand scheme of your day is well-spent when it protects your mental health, career longevity and quality patient care.

Acceptance

Part of self-care is setting boundaries with ourselves about what we can emotionally handle on any given day. Sometimes it may be necessary to intake the information presented to us, but not the emotion.

As a veterinarian you understand this concept well, working in a highly emotionally charged environment. It is important to make sure that emotions and feelings are placed in the right place for processing. When emotions are projected from an owner to the veterinarian, they are not emotions that you need to put in your personal box of responsibilities. Place them in the expression box that is connected to an event, not you as a person. Accept that you can only control and manage feelings that are your own. You are a witness to the emotion, not responsible for the cause, nor is it in your window of responsibility to resolve the emotion.

Action

When we take care of our mental health and ensure that we are cultivating healthy boundaries around ourselves, it is easier to compartmentalize the troubling things that come our way. Creating an uplifting and positive environment is something in our control. Cultivating our surroundings to reflect our needs over our ideals of wellness ensures that we have safe places to turn when feelings of being overwhelmed start to dominate our mental processes.