

## **Preparing for holiday stress starts with planning**

The holidays are a time for celebration and familial bonding. The next few months bring the opportunity for excitement and stress, but veterinarians especially will be dealing with a special kind of influx during the holiday season: holiday pet gifting.

Many people might not take into consideration the enormous emotional and financial responsibility that gifting a pet can incur. Animal wellness clinicians know the holiday season can lead to a spike in new patients in the office, and they have to mentally prepare themselves every year for conversations with dozens of new families on a spectrum of “readiness” to welcome a new addition into their lives.

The added workload during this time can also be very draining to a veterinary practice and can vary year to year. There is never a solid indicator of what will be coming next for an animal support team, but setting up avenues for success early can have a big payoff in the long run.

Not wanting to cut through the excitement of a family's new pet can put a lot of undue pressure on medical providers to have difficult conversations with clients, like where and how to house that new addition. Being mindful that your services are always available and that you have to keep well for the next patient are viable ways to prevent feeling bogged down this holiday season.

Being able to mentally separate the personal and the clinical is something every medical professional has had to battle with more than once in their career, and having healthy coping mechanisms for the stress of those situations is not always on the forefront of our minds when it comes to holiday planning. Taking care of others is a natural instinct for anyone in the medical field, but it's important to remember that being able to make important decisions for the patient begins with being able to make important decisions for ourselves. Mental wellness must take priority when we are looking into a future full of unknowns.

### **Does the pet match the place?**

Knowing an animal is going to a home that may not be equipped to handle a new addition can be extremely stressful. Yard space, the presence of small children and having adequate room to grow are all issues that can greatly affect the pet but are not easily remedied by the family. Large breeds, for example, are manageable while they are puppies, but when they begin to reach maximum weight and are still living in a small apartment, seasoned professionals can predict certain behavioral issues that may arise for the family. They then face the challenge of

explaining to an excited family that their living situation is not ideal for the animal they have selected. This can make the medical professional feel a general sense of malaise and exhaustion associated with a condition called compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a difficult and elevated form of burnout that affects veterinarians and animal wellness techs at various stages of their careers. Elizabeth Strand, associate clinical professor and founding director of veterinary social work at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, explains that “veterinarians face ethical dilemmas three to five times per week, and moral stress, like dealing with death and illness on a daily basis, delivering bad news to clients, dealing with animal cruelty, and seeing clients struggle to balance financial needs with the needs of their pets are primary contributors to compassion fatigue”.

Getting ahead of compassion fatigue can be challenging, but ensuring the family knows you and your practice are always there to assist in times of hardship can make medical professionals feel they are still connected to the wellbeing of their patients. When it is time to move on to the next patient, a gentle reminder that you cannot be everywhere at once may alleviate some of the pangs of fatigue that begin to manifest.

### **Do your best and rest**

Being fair with yourself is something many people working in the medical field let fall by the wayside when trying to be the most effective provider they can be, but it is essential to mental wellness. It is fair and self-compassionate to allow the brain time to heal and decompress after a stressful interaction. The holidays bring no shortage of such interactions, and there is no better time than the present to put systems in place to help alleviate some of that stress. Be mindful and be well as we keep moving forward into the end of the year!