

Preventative self-care

The No. 1 piece of advice veterinarians can give their patient families across the board is to encourage them to think of their animal's preventative care. Many health risks can be avoided by making sure this foundation is set early and maintained often.

When thinking about your own mental wellness, do you feel you have done yourself the service of practicing preventative care?

While taking mental inventory may not always be as straightforward as listening to a heartbeat, there are warning signs we can begin to notice in ourselves that we are approaching a certain mental capacity. When we begin to feel easily upset, overwhelmed and stressed, we are already at a point of having to fight to get our security back. There are many ways we can help our future selves, however, and practice the preventative care we always encourage in our clients.

Care and release

There are so many things taking up real estate in the mind of someone working in the medical field, but not all the thoughts we have are able to be voiced. Responsibilities and personal politics tend to play a large role in how we communicate in the workplace. Those unspoken conversations we have only with ourselves don't always result in satisfying conclusions, and those loose ends can start to become a tangled mess in our minds inhibiting our function.

Veterinarian Megan Hughes touches on one of those unspoken discussions in an article about mental health and veterinary medicine. When individuals become caustic about their vet bills, we know the answer we would like to give is: "Veterinary medicine is expensive. Our equipment is expensive, medications are expensive, lab costs are expensive. Many practices turn no profit at all." This conversation cannot often be explained so simply with an irritable family, however. Every veterinarian has had someone misunderstand the financial responsibility of giving care. Not having the room to explain makes this situation even more uncomfortable.

It can be gratifying and worthwhile to get those feelings and emotions out to someone. Explaining your own unique situation that you had with a client and being able to hear your own words of frustration and, after that, self-compassion means those words are right there for you the next time you need them. Instead of staying unprocessed and ignored, your own

understanding and level-headedness about the financial situation of animal medicine can be easily called upon and remembered the next time a client becomes frustrated in your direction.

This, of course, applies to all difficult conversations we wish we could have with our patient families. So much can be left unsaid and unprocessed when we aren't actively taking mental inventory. By being able to release those feelings in a controlled environment on our own terms and then recall the discoveries we made in that space later, we practice preventative care.

Give it a name

In some instances, it can be difficult to identify the way a situation is making us feel and put it into words. This feeling can compound when it's something we have dealt with repeatedly in our field, and our response to repeatedly encountering that stressor can start to make us averse to tasks we must perform in order to do our job.

In a study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, researchers categorized the act of putting feelings into words as "affect labeling." They found that thoughtfully identifying the cause and nature of an individual's stressor allowed those being studied to avoid being so deeply affected by troubling thoughts. With time, those stressors were able to be removed from the list of the study subjects' worries altogether as their confidence in dealing with them negated the worry they had that those stressors would return to them.

Without being able to see the problem we are facing in the real world, it can be difficult to ascertain what exactly about our situation is causing us so much frustration. Listening to another working individual discuss their real-life work and personal struggles can help us put an identifier on the feelings of discomfort we are having for our own situations and help us begin the process of affect labeling. By processing in this way, we can begin to conquer those recurring instances of discomfort and overcome them in the moment; it just takes a bit of preventative thinking to get us to that point.

The tools we have available

Prioritizing preventative care is an important part of staying on top of our self-awareness. Just like we encourage our patient families to get exercise and think about the quality of life and personal enrichment of their animals, we must do the same for ourselves when it comes to cultivating an environment of peace in ourselves. By utilizing the support networks available to us before we feel we need them, we can practice preventative mental wellness that benefits us before we need it.