



**WELLNESS™**  
REVOLUTION

**Part 5 of our Wellness Revolution series**

# **Build Resilience & Improve Wellbeing**

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Resilience. Such a weighty word that is one of many buzzwords now circling the veterinary profession as we strive for better work-life balance. What is this nebulous concept? How do we add resilience to our wellbeing tool box?

First, what does it mean? Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (eg, family and relationship problems, serious health problems, workplace and financial stressors). Simply, resilience means bouncing back from difficult experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Developing personal resilience is a lifetime process that does not just happen. As you navigate through difficult life circumstances, you must actively engage in developing your own store of resilience by consciously practicing self-care and personal reflection and building community.

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## Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (eg, family and relationship problems, serious health problems, workplace and financial stressors). Simply, resilience means bouncing back from difficult experiences.

Just as all aspects of human personality and intellect are diverse, the same is true of the capacity for resilience. Recent research indicates that personal genetics can contribute to an individual's ability to adapt to life stress.<sup>2</sup> Some fortunate people are born into families with healthy parents, financial stability, and a supportive community. Others do not share such auspicious beginnings. Recognizing that differences in genetic temperament and early experience play a role in resilience capacity is important. Although resilience may come to some more easily than others, the good news is that with conscious attention, this skill set can be expanded.

### Individual Resilience

How do you foster resilience? No matter where you start, the American Psychological Association suggests weaving these strategies into your daily life.<sup>3</sup>

- **Make connections.**  
Make time for human connection outside of work (eg, attend a church or faith-based organization, hold regular family gatherings, participate in community-based events). Spending time with supportive, compassionate people is important.
- **Cultivate a growth mindset.**  
Reframing your thoughts can make it easier to bounce back from challenging circumstances. If you make a mistake at work, learn from it, seek consultation, and let go of negative self-talk. Do not aim for perfection—it is unattainable.
- **Accept change as a part of life.**  
Adapt to the changes that occur on a daily, if not hourly, basis (eg, ever-changing practice protocols, technology, work scenarios) and your happiness and longevity in the veterinary profession will improve. For example, rather than silently fuming each time something frustrates you, make the decision to take action. Speak up assertively and suggest how to make a change for the better.
- **Take steps to accomplish your goals.**  
Set long-term goals according to what you want to accomplish in life so you know where you are headed. Commit to one action each day that will move you toward your ultimate goals.
- **Be decisive and act.**  
Spend time contemplating what you hope to achieve, which is a necessary component of building resilience. Once you have clarified your course, do not second-guess yourself. Take that next step.
- **Pursue self-discovery.**  
Experiment. Explore. Be bold when trying new skills and developing new talents. Courageously moving into new arenas is the only way to learn your strengths and discover activities you enjoy.



■ **Encourage a positive self-view.**

Practice surveying your own strengths, which can increase positive emotions and self-compassion, the building blocks of resilience.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, most people see the good in others more easily than they see it in themselves.

■ **Keep things in perspective.**

Identify any cognitive distortions (ie, ways you perceive reality inaccurately) that plague you, including thinking in black-and-white or overstating small problems as major challenges. Pay attention to the ways you address life's complications because such habitual thoughts reinforce negative emotions and thinking patterns.

■ **Maintain hope.**

Keep a sense of optimism to build your capacity for novel experiences, which are necessary for innovation and creation and can lead to increased resilience.

■ **Concentrate on self-care.**

Take care of yourself and you will be better able to care for others. Veterinary careers require altruism, but you must recognize the need to balance this tendency by attending to your own needs. (See **Resource**.)

■ **Practice mindfulness.**

Cultivate awareness of what is around you and practice formal

or informal meditation, which should give you the most bang for your buck in terms of quelling your stress.<sup>4</sup> Mindfulness may be another wellbeing buzzword, but it is worthy of attention.

Practice these building blocks to begin building protection against the stresses and challenges of daily life.

### **Workplace Resilience**

Most veterinary professionals know that what happens in the workplace can impact their ability to cope individually. Veterinary medicine often requires superhuman efforts because of the long hours, difficult cases, patient crises, and life-and-death situations. Despite building resilience in their personal lives, team members may find themselves worn down by events of the workday.<sup>5</sup>

Helping veterinary teams increase their collective resilience is imperative. Consider which strategies could help increase the team's ability to cope with daily upsets and stress, and weave them into team meetings or training sessions. Team resilience can flow from team members having a sense of positive control over the workplace.

Does the team have a clear picture of what success looks like for the

practice? Are there opportunities for team members to process breakdowns in communication, medical errors, or difficult client interactions? Can individuals find a quiet reading corner or take a walk during the day to escape the busy practice? Does the practice encourage a community mindset and support personal and group pride? Are team members encouraged to establish professional goals and supported in their professional development?

All these elements are important to ensure team satisfaction, retention, and stability. Remember, people have different capacities and abilities for personal resilience. Team members who are supported, provided opportunities to build a caring community, and encouraged to lead with their strengths and contribute to workplace improvement create a culture of resilience. Making workplace resilience a team goal strengthens each team member's ability to cope

### **Resource**

- Self-care checklist. Ruby K. *Veterinary Team Brief*. 2017;5(1):19.

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with the challenges inherent to veterinary practice.

## Conclusion

Resilience is not built overnight. It starts with a resolution and, like building muscle, is created through the conscious daily pursuit of positive, strengthening habits. Think of gaining resilience as methodically building a buffer between yourself and the challenges that occur in every person's life and workplace.

Start by taking stock of your personal coping strategies and your workplace culture. Then, decide to implement strategies daily that increase your resilience capacity. You owe it to yourself. You owe it to your practice. ■

## References

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**FUN FACT:** Bethany spent 6 seasons working on a helitack crew fighting fires. For one fall project, she helped tag and take vitals for the wolf population. Needless to say, she is adventurous!

## TAKE ACTION ✓

Here are some practical ways for individuals to put resilience strategies into action throughout the day.

- 1 Make sure you have some personal (not just work-related) human contact with a family member, friend, or colleague every day. Make it fun or meaningful so you get a break from the mundane.
- 2 When you experience a difficult case, client, or patient, try changing your perspective instead of allowing frustration to overwhelm you. Look at the experience and think, *This is really difficult, and it can teach me something important—patience and compassion.*
- 3 Take a deep breath and practice letting go of your stress and frustration when things do not go as planned.
- 4 Consider a short-term goal you could put into place immediately to help you gain better control when some aspect of life is getting you down (eg, finances). Instead of buying a latte every day, buy a special creamer to enhance the office coffee.
- 5 Build in time throughout the day to reflect on what you did well and how you would like to change behaviors or actions next time to create a better outcome.
- 6 Take 30 seconds several times each day to feel the sensation of your feet on the floor or the breath deep in your lungs. The more grounded you are in your body, the better you are able to accommodate stressors.