



Part 8 of our Wellness Revolution series

Why Perfectionism Is Not Perfect

Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LPC

Veterinary Information Network/VIN Foundation/Vets4Vets
Davis, California

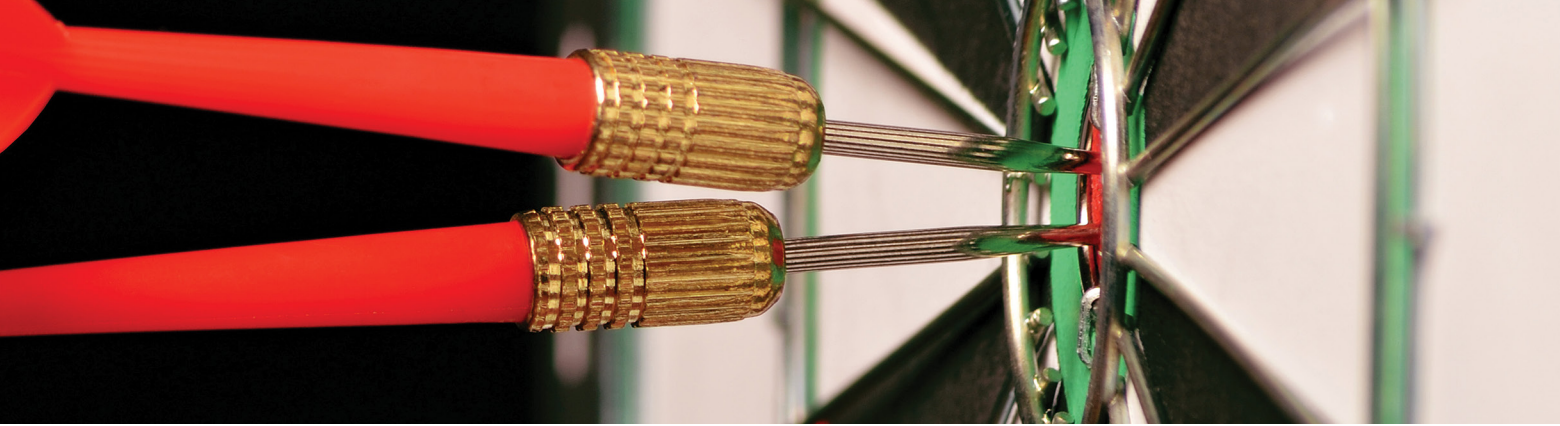
Resources

- Self-Compassion. Neff K. self-compassion.org
- Vets4Vets. vinfoundation.org/vets4vets

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles at brief.vet/veterinary-wellness

Perfectionism is one characteristic that unites many veterinary team members regardless of background, gender, education, or training. On the surface, perfectionism may *seem* a desirable ideal because veterinary teams care for patients and interact with clients, but it is actually detrimental to the entire team's mental health. When practice leadership considers perfectionism a virtue, all team members often suffer considerable stress. And, contrary to popular opinion, perfectionism does not result in improved patient care—it actually undermines it.

Perfectionism, which is sometimes referred to as “unrelenting standards,” is a maladaptive schema, an unhelpful way of thinking and interacting with others and the world at large.¹ An early maladaptive schema has been defined as



To let go of perfectionism, we need to develop self-compassion and learn to treat ourselves with the care and concern we would give a close friend.

“a broad pervasive theme or pattern regarding oneself and one’s relationship with others, developed during childhood and elaborated throughout one’s lifetime, and dysfunctional to a significant degree.”¹

Schemas are extremely stable and enduring patterns comprised of memories, bodily sensations, emotions, and cognitions, that, once activated, cause one to feel intense emotions.² Mental health professionals believe perfectionism and other such schemas do not spring up “de novo.” They are formed as we develop a sense of who we are from our dealings with caregivers (eg, parents, extended families, teachers) and usually are in place by early childhood.

The Development

Perfectionism develops from one of 2 broad ways of thinking about ourselves:

- We have been made to feel defective in some way and so spend our

lives constantly trying to disprove our unworthiness to others.

- We have been validated for being “good” and so seek to prove our goodness and hear the accolades.

Perfectionists often have other traits that are counter to personal happiness and a well-functioning veterinary team (eg, punitiveness, negativity and/or pessimism, emotional inhibition). Those firmly in perfectionism’s grasp often punish others they believe “fall short of the mark,” are constantly fault-seeking, and lack openness in interpersonal interactions. They also can be trapped in the nirvana fallacy, so they fail to even begin a task, fearing they will not do it perfectly. The nirvana fallacy is the name given to the informal fallacy of comparing actual things with unrealistic, idealized alternatives. It can also refer to the tendency to assume that there is a perfect solution to a particular problem.³ The perfect solution fallacy is closely related.

A perfectionist is not only constantly fearful of and extremely susceptible to external criticism but also can fall victim to a particularly vicious internal critic that shames the perfectionist into thinking he or she will never be good enough, work hard enough, or know enough. Life is spent continually trying to keep these thoughts at bay.

The Pros & Cons

Perfectionism does have some significant benefits (eg, academic and professional success), which makes accepting less than perfect particularly difficult. The high school or college perfectionist who considered a 92% on a test a failure often becomes the veterinary team member who can tolerate nothing less than a positive outcome for every patient and positive interactions with every client.

Perfectionists often think catastrophically, and suggesting they become even a little less than perfect is



unfathomable. “If I’m not a perfectionist, my patients will die,” is a common refrain because being “good enough” is simply not an option. They live in a black-and-white world in which there are only successes and failures and no middle ground. To make matters worse, successes are often trivialized because the benchmark for perfectionism is set so high.

Many of us have worked with perfectionists. They include the following:

- The practice leaders who believe the client is always right, no matter

the rudeness level or sense of self-entitlement shown to the team

- The veterinarians who think their protocol is the only way to treat a patient and undermine another associate rather than engage collegially and discuss their thoughts and supporting information
- The veterinary nurses who criticize the new hire for perceived failures

Perfectionists often project a self-assuredness despite the significant self-doubt and fear just below their tough exterior.

Moving Beyond Perfectionism

If we see perfectionism in ourselves, how can we move toward a healthier way of being?

- First, we need to remind ourselves each day we can only do what time and resources allow. Many times we blame the client for not bringing the patient in soon enough after clinical signs developed, or we question their reluctance or inability to fund diagnostics and treatments. However, we seldom know our clients’ back story, so we concoct their stories ourselves.
- We also need to remind ourselves that, just like our clients, we, too, can be limited because of knowledge gaps, the services our practices and teams offer patients and clients, and our fatigue level. Then, too, we work with patients, who are biological systems that, while usually very lovable, have not read the textbooks and so cannot respond about even the most well-chosen treatments. Veterinary medicine is predicated on a variety of factors often beyond our control.
- To let go of perfectionism, we need to develop self-compassion and learn to treat ourselves with the care and concern we would give a close friend. Letting go does not mean

TAKE ACTION

- 1** Consider introducing self-compassion to the practice by discussing it at an upcoming team meeting. (See **Resources**, page 50.) When you feel your inner critic accusing you of not being good enough, take a few moments and talk to yourself as a good friend would. Talk the same way to a fellow veterinary team member when you hear him or her being unnecessarily hard on him- or herself.
- 2** Avoid harsh judgments of others’ intentions and actions (eg, a client may not adhere to his pet’s medication protocol because of problems at home, a work schedule that makes dosing intervals impractical, or interfering personal issues).
- 3** Begin working on understanding the origins of your perfectionism. This may require therapy with a mental health professional.
- 4** Realize that while perfection is not attainable, the world is still a beautiful place. Change those things you can control, and be realistic about what is achievable given your time and resources.

Let us choose self-compassion over perfectionism, treat ourselves as our own best friend, and see the difference that makes.

we should adopt a mindset with which working half-heartedly, caring for our patients haphazardly, and having a ready list of excuses for not giving our best is acceptable. Think about the last time you made a mistake in your personal or professional life. Now, think about how a good friend would listen to your story and how he or she would respond. We would hope a good friend would listen attentively, be supportive, and be appropriately challenging to help put the issue into perspective.

Self-compassion is often criticized—not surprisingly, largely by perfectionists—who think developing a self-compassionate stance means we will lack the motivation to do our best and our patients will suffer. However, recent research has shown that people who develop self-compassion are more willing to pursue workplace challenges because they are not afraid and are willing to take well-considered risks.⁴

Perfectionists are hypervigilant and always stressed, rigid, and looking for ways things can go wrong. With that mindset, clinical errors are more likely to occur, whereas with self-compassion, we are mentally flexible and mindful, aware of the situation moment-to-moment, and able to respond appropriately. As a result, errors are reduced.⁴

Conclusion

Perfectionism probably allowed us to achieve the grades and degrees necessary to be part of a veterinary team. However, for most people, perfectionism is no longer an ally but actually a liability that can prevent us from enjoying our professional and personal lives. Let us choose self-compassion over perfectionism, treat ourselves as our own best friend, and see the difference that makes. ■

References

1. Young J. Schema therapy: early maladaptive schemas. Schema Therapy Institute. <http://www.schematherapy.com/id63.htm>. Accessed July 2017.

2. Schema Therapy Institute. <http://www.schematherapy.com/id201.htm>. Accessed July 2017.
3. Nirvana fallacy. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana_fallacy. Updated May 17, 2017. Accessed July 2017.
4. Neff K, Germer C. Self-compassion and psychological well-being. <https://www.theschwartzcenter.org/media/Schwartz-Webinar-20141009-Bulletpoints-Schwartz.pdf>. Accessed July 2017.



MICHELE GASPAR, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LPC, is a board-certified feline specialist and human psychotherapist. As a member of Vets4Vets (vinfoundation.org/vets4vets), a free service of the VIN Foundation, she works one-on-one with veterinarians on personal and professional issues. Also at VIN, she is a consultant in the Feline Internal Medicine folder and facilitates an annual online course on mindfulness meditation for veterinarians and other veterinary team members, as well as an annual mindfulness meditation retreat. Michele is also a psychotherapist at Live Oak Chicago and an analytic candidate at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. She is a 1994 graduate of University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine and a 2012 graduate of Loyola University in Chicago. Michele lives in Chicago with her husband, 2 basset hounds, 3 cats, and a tank of engaging freshwater fish.

FUN FACT: In 2004, Michele taught an introduction to small animal medicine course to Vietnamese veterinarians in Hanoi.