



**Part 7 of our Wellness Revolution series**

# **Working with Your Animal Instincts**

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Do you spend your time at work simply going through the motions? Do you feel tired, painful, addicted to caffeine, and like you've seen every case before? Are you constantly putting out other people's fires or tending to everyone else's needs? Do you spend the time you could be sleeping worrying about a patient or what someone said on social media?

If you answered *Yes* to any of these questions, you are at risk for poor work satisfaction, compassion fatigue, burnout, and negative patient outcomes, and it's time to flip that script and put yourself at the top of the triage list.

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles at [brief.vet/veterinary-wellness](https://brief.vet/veterinary-wellness)



## Individual personal growth cannot be attained without first obtaining food, water, air, security, love, respect, and confidence.

Veterinary medicine is physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding. We are trained to handle client and patient needs, but we rarely care for ourselves. Following are some practical tips for navigating life as a busy professional while taking care of your own needs as well as those of your patients.

### **The Human Animal**

Let's begin by thinking of veterinary professionals as animals—Human Animals. The Human Animal has basic needs that must be met to enable her or him to perform at the highest levels. Abraham Maslow discussed a hierarchical pyramid of needs for all humans<sup>1</sup> and explained that individual personal growth cannot be attained without first obtaining food, water, air, security, love, respect, and confidence.

The Human Animal's needs tend to get lost in the veterinary practice, with its hustle and bustle of cases, call backs, and barking dogs. The short-term effects of neglecting the

Human Animal's needs can include hunger, thirst, tiredness, and frustration, while the long-term effects may include physical injuries, mental fatigue, team infighting, patient injuries, and medical errors. Following are some ways to care for the Human Animal, keep the work environment safe, and foster lasting team relationships.

### **Food**

Food is love. Here are some thoughts about feeding the Human Animal.

- Eat when you are hungry, not when you “should” or when you “have a sec.” Hydration is more important than food in many cases—your brain, joints, and gut will thank you when you are well hydrated. Water is best; the occasional tea, coffee, or soda can help but does not add to your total daily water intake.
- Eat real food. The human body is designed to process food, not to eat processed foods. You may not have time to prepare a 10-course meal,

but you can prepare and plan meals days in advance.

- Take time to chew and enjoy your food. Good food should not be gulped down in 30 seconds.
- Consider team-based meal preparation. One day a week, ask a team member to be responsible for feeding the whole team, and rotate the responsibility among the other team members. You will try foods you would not naturally gravitate toward and learn more about your team members in the process.

### **Stress**

For the Human Animal, stress isn't really stress—it's a perceived threat. In the modern world, we may not need to run from a bear in the woods, but we are bombarded with threats throughout the day. Technology is a great example of a threat (ie, stress) because every time you receive or send a text or message, dopamine and epinephrine influence your physiology.<sup>2,3</sup> The need to respond to each notification as soon as it's received is a stressor, plain and



simple. At work, that stressor can be amplified by the dozens of cases and the other needs and demands of the day. The outcome is a stressed-out Human Animal.

We have all seen a fractious cat, a flighty horse, or a nervous, cornered dog. We recognize threats or signs of fear and can use low-stress handling techniques, food, or other motivators for these nervous or anxious patients. The Human Animal is similar, if you know what to look for.

- The team member you see as disengaged, snippy, or even mean is probably just fearful and anxious. Check in with her or him to see how you can help.
- Monitoring anesthesia for multi-hour dentistry is psychologically and physically taxing. Give people mental breaks from intense procedures and they are bound to return re-engaged.

- Celebrate the cases that go smoothly, and encourage open discussion about those that do not. Difficult discussions are part of the veterinary profession.

### Sleep

Do you think sleep impacts the Human Animal at work? You bet it does. You shouldn't really sleep at work (with the caveats of shift work and emergency cases), but you do need sleep to recover and recharge.

- Sleep is non-negotiable. The Human Animal needs 6 to 8 hours to recover.<sup>4</sup> Reduce or eliminate blue light, which suppresses natural melatonin secretion and prevents moving into deeper phases of restorative rest.
- Create a sleep den. Keep the den dark, cool (ie, 65°F-69°F), clean, and free of distractions (eg, remove electronics).
- Cat naps are effective. Naps should

not last more than 40 minutes—more than that is considered sleep.<sup>5</sup>

- Put your phone in Do Not Disturb mode or turn off the Wi-Fi to limit sleep disturbance. The 2 AM Instagram notification can wait.

### Movement

The Human Animal is designed to go through a full range of motion without pain. Here are ways to move—and keep moving—at work.

- Sitting is the new smoking. Excessive sitting is related to chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity.<sup>6</sup> Consider standing workstations rather than constantly sitting at a desk. Get up and move for at least 5 minutes for every 60 to 90 minutes you are sedentary.
- Test your mobility by getting up and down from the floor without using your hands.
- Try squatting down to see patients rather than having team members struggle to keep them on the table.
- Consider walking meetings rather than sitting around a table.

## TAKE ACTION

- 1 Choose one item from each recommended list (ie, food, stress, sleep, movement) to experiment with each week over the next month.
- 2 At the end of each week, assess the impact of each change on your Human Animal.

### Conclusion

Above all else, have fun. Get back to playing and laughing the way you did when your Human Animal was young. Self-care isn't selfish; if you aren't taking care of yourself, you are

# Self-care isn't selfish; if you aren't taking care of yourself, you are doing a disservice to your team members, clients, and patients.

doing a disservice to your team members, clients, and patients. Veterinary medicine is a team sport, and we need to be constantly vigilant and look out for one another. Caring for yourself is necessary, as is caring for the rest of the pack.

Veterinary professionals often try to do everything at once. Choose one new habit, work until it sticks—usually a few weeks—and then add a new habit into the mix. Do not try to be the “biggest loser.” Sustainable transformation is the goal. ■

## References

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**FUN FACT:** Jen loves chocolate—the darker the better—and peanut butter, but she detests them together. The world's supply of Reese's is safe around her! She also lifts kettlebells in traditional Russian style and competes once a year or so in StrongSport or long cycle.

## HR Corner

### Discounts for Team Member Pets: Be Sure Guidelines Are Specific

Katherine Dobbs, LVT, CVPM, PHR

Most veterinary practices offer generous discounts to team members to care for personal pets, often above the standard 20% IRS allowance. Any additional discount is considered taxable income.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the dollar amount or percentage discount, specific guidelines can help avoid confusion and disappointment.

- **Specify which charges the discount applies to and how the discount is applied.** For example, consider offering a different discount on professional services than on goods and supplies. Generally, services are discounted at a percentage of the cost to clients, whereas goods and supplies (eg, food, medications) are set at the cost the practice had to pay for the item, plus a marginal increase, typically 10%,<sup>1</sup> for inventory-related expenses (eg, shipping, handling, storing, dispensing).
- **Specify how many pets the discount will cover.** If one team member has 6 pets and another has only one, the team member with the most pets is getting a greater benefit. If pet insurance is offered instead of a discount, how many pets can be covered by a policy paid by the practice? Team members can accumulate pets easily and quickly, so be specific.
- **Specify exactly what qualifies as a team member's pet.** What if the team member lives with his or her parents? Does the policy include the parents' pets? What if a team member's pet goes to live with someone else in the family? Consider defining a “team member pet” as one that is financially supported by the team member and lives with him or her full time.
- **Specify when the bill should be paid.** Are team members allowed to carry a balance from month to month, or are they required to pay in full at the time of the expense or within the month of purchase? Will there be a finance charge? At what point will management intervene and garnish the team member's wages to pay down the bill? Is that legal in your state?

Team members appreciate a discount for their pets, but practice management must have specific policies to avoid confusion and disappointment and prevent abuse of the benefit. ■

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