

Perspectives on Veterinary Student Well-Being

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For the past 12 years, I have had the privilege of working with, and learning from, veterinary students. I have heard stories of resilience, passion, commitment, and dedication. Together we have explored their desire to serve animals and their owners and found ways to support them as they navigate the challenges of veterinary school. Some students say they were called to the profession of veterinary medicine at an early age; others come to the profession after having had another career, finishing a college degree, traveling, or raising a family. For some, it is a love of science and medicine, wanting to be a part of a profession that helps and heals. For others, it is following in the footsteps of family members or an early connection to a beloved pet.

Veterinary medicine is a deeply complex and rewarding profession that goes beyond working with puppies and kitties. Veterinary professionals are highly committed and dedicated individuals who work hard to care for their patients, clients, colleagues, and communities. For those who devote their lives to the service of others, the physical, emotional, and spiritual demands can be a cost to personal and professional well-being.

I begin my presentations with what I call “the self-care equation”: $X \geq Y$. In this equation, X is you and your well-being, and Y is everyone and everything else. This may be a difficult concept for those who dedicate their lives to care for others. Although there are times and situations when Y takes precedence, when others’ needs must be put before our own, this should only be as needed, not always. The equation is like the oxygen message on the airplane: Secure

your oxygen mask before assisting others. Take care of yourself so you can take care of others.

Veterinary students are high achievers and eager learners, intelligent, and focused. Veterinary schools select students who have proven they are ready to be “doctors in training.” For those who have worked hard to stand out, it may be difficult to join a class full of other standouts. The work required to be accepted into school and get good grades, volunteer and experiential hours, and letters of recommendation takes time, dedication, and focus. Once accepted, students may be told that grades do not matter as much. Some even hear “C = DVM.” This can be disconcerting. The drive to achieve and do well does not go away the first day of veterinary school. It remains. For those who see themselves doing an internship and/or residency after receiving their DVM, a C does not equal what they are working toward. It is important to consider how we teach and mentor students. Even though we may know there is much more to a veterinarian than grades, up until the time of admission the message has been, “Make yourself stand out above the rest.”

Many students I see experience the *imposter phenomenon*, a belief that they are inadequate or incompetent despite evidence indicating they are skilled and successful. Imposter phenomenon can be heard in comments such as the following:

- “They must have admitted me by mistake.”
- “Look at my classmates. They are so confident and seem so comfortable. I am a nervous wreck. Maybe I don’t belong here.”

- “Everyone else is doing so well. They can answer all the questions and seem to understand the information. I am the only one who is not getting this. When I fail, they will know I am a fraud.”

Students are in an environment where they are constantly being evaluated, measured against a standard and expectations set by others and, even more daunting, the standards they have set for themselves (1). The stakes of not doing well in undergraduate or graduate school were high. The stakes of not doing well in veterinary school feel even higher. Not only do students need to succeed for themselves, they believe they need to succeed for their family, the veterinarian back home who wrote them a recommendation, and their first-grade teacher who noticed and nurtured their love for animals. The pressure students put on themselves to succeed is immense. To overcome the imposter phenomenon, they work harder, believing if they can perform at a high level, no one will notice they are not meant to be here.

A common trait of those who feel like imposters is to diminish their accomplishments or give credit to others or simply to luck. When I hear students downplaying their achievements and successes or attributing them to outside

sources, I ask them to make a list of their accomplishments in sentences with a period at the end: “I got into veterinary school.” “I placed at that internship.” “I got that scholarship.” Others may have helped along the way, but the student did the work. It is important to own achievements, successes, and accomplishments.

Health and well-being are often equated with the capacity to be resilient—to bounce back after difficulty, to recover quickly and continue on, to overcome any obstacle. The ability to be resilient is important to survival. It helps us get through crises, keep moving forward, and not give up. Veterinary students exhibit high levels of resilience. They know how to overcome obstacles and be successful in the face of adversity. Resilience is more than getting through the trying times. It is about reaching out for support, accessing resources, processing, reflecting on how one was impacted, and finding time to recover and heal. It may mean taking time to grieve a loss, process a trauma, or rest after a period of intense stress and demands. The Japanese have a process called *Kintsugi*, the art of broken pieces, which encompasses the concept of acceptance. When a vase is broken and in pieces, there is no attempt to hide the damage. Instead, the vase is repaired and the cracks filled with gold or silver. The cracks are literally



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illuminated, so the vase becomes more beautiful because it was broken. The repair and restoration make the broken whole again (2). Kintsugi represents healing.

Implementing the self-care equation, addressing the imposter phenomenon, and focusing on resilience, connection, and healing are supported by the ability to set healthy boundaries. Healthy personal boundaries are the physical, emotional, and mental limits we establish to protect ourselves from being manipulated, used, or violated by others. They allow us to separate who we are and what we think and feel from the thoughts and feelings of others. A physical boundary delineates where one property ends and another begins. It can be easily seen and identified. It is our responsibility to establish and state our personal boundaries because they are not as evident as physical boundaries. We must determine what we will let in and what we will keep out (3). Boundaries are functional. Setting and keeping boundaries is essential to show others what we value, what we are responsible for, and what does not fit for us.

We teach people how to treat us by the way we treat ourselves. Others learn from watching us. Every time we say one thing and do another, we teach people they can ignore what we say. If we continually stretch our boundaries to meet others' needs by acting in a way that is inconsistent with what we say, they will see this. Setting healthy boundaries is hard, and yet if we say it, we must do it. The short-term discomfort of asserting oneself and saying no is less distressing than the negative feelings of frustration, resentment, and, ultimately, exhaustion of continually saying yes. Situations and the feelings that go along with our inability to set boundaries affect not only relationships with others but also contribute to individual burnout. Many have difficulty saying no. Some can say the initial "no" and then feel compelled to explain, defend, rationalize, or compromise the "no." For boundaries to be respected, we must respect ourselves by sticking with "no" as is. "No" is a complete sentence and a fine response. There is no need for explanation. Steven Covey's Urgent Important Matrix is helpful when considering setting boundaries. It consists of 4 quadrants: The top left is Urgent and Important, the top right is Not Urgent and Important, the bottom left is Urgent and Not Important, and the bottom right

is Not Urgent and Not Important (4). It can sometimes seem like everything feels urgent and important—if not to us, to others—and then it becomes that way for us. Taking time to consider the urgency and importance of things can help determine the actions that will follow.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when setting healthy boundaries:

- **Permission.** Acknowledge you are worthy of self-care. YOU are part of the care equation.
- **Recognize your needs and limits.** Meeting physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social needs is important to overall health and well-being. Setting limits is essential in situations of ethical and moral stress as well as at times when we need to step back, renew, and refocus.
- **Clarity.** Being clear is a critical element in boundary setting. Be specific, confident, and clear about your limits and expectations. Lack of clarity leads to misunderstanding, which leads to unmet expectations and, often, negative outcomes.
- **Consistency.** If you set a boundary and expect others to respect it, you also need to respect it. Consistency is a sign of professionalism and respect for self and others.
- **Engage support.** Accountability can be a motivator. Find a trusted friend, colleague, or family member to help you stay focused on your goal of setting healthy boundaries.

The skills and tools students learn and practice in veterinary school can help them as they set out into the world of veterinary practice. The support offered in many schools allows students the opportunity to try things out, practice self-care, and find ways to promote well-being. Most schools have mental health and well-being resources available within the college of veterinary medicine. Being actively engaged in personal and professional growth and well-being is a skill equally as important as the skills attained through didactic, clinical, scientific, and medical experience. Active engagement supports students in being whole, healthy human beings with the scientific and medical knowledge and clinical skills to be competent and confident veterinary practitioners serving patients, clients, colleagues, and community. Be well.

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