



High prevalence of burnout in veterinary medicine: Exploring interventions to improve well-being

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ABSTRACT

The veterinary profession faces a critical challenge: burnout. Long hours, emotional strain, financial pressures, and difficult client interactions contribute to stress and drive veterinary professionals from the field. This harms not only their well-being but also patient care and workplace morale. Research highlights the concerning mental state of veterinarians, with studies finding high rates of burnout, compassion fatigue, and burden transfer (stress from client challenges). Early-career and female veterinarians are most vulnerable. Several studies explore interventions to improve veterinary well-being. Educational programs targeting communication and acceptance of difficult clients show promise in reducing stress and burnout. Additionally, a web-based acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) program demonstrates effectiveness in reducing occupational distress. It is crucial to address the veterinary burnout crisis. By creating supportive work environments, prioritizing mental health, and implementing interventions like ACT training, we can retain veterinary professionals and ensure a thriving profession that provides optimal care for animals and their caregivers.

Veterinarians navigate a demanding landscape throughout their careers. The emotional weight of caring for sick and injured animals, compounded by long hours, challenging cases, and financial pressures, can lead to stress, burnout, and work-life imbalance (Bartram et al., 2009; Hatch et al., 2011). These pressures are further amplified by the need for continuous learning amidst advancements in veterinary medicine, while also navigating difficult client interactions and complex ethical dilemmas concerning animal welfare and treatment decisions.

While PRISMA provides a rigorous framework for systematically reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses, this paper chose to utilize Google Search to access a broader selection of peer-reviewed articles and scholarly resources specifically focused on burnout among veterinarians. Emphasizing the importance of peer-reviewed literature, we meticulously curated studies from the National Library of Medicine to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This paper specifically addresses the challenges that difficult client interactions pose for veterinarians, drawing insights from this extensive body of peer-reviewed research. By prioritizing high-quality, peer-reviewed articles, we aimed to capture diverse perspectives and findings that illuminate the complexities of burnout in the veterinary profession. The resulting analysis not only highlights the emotional toll on veterinary professionals but also identifies actionable strategies to mitigate these

challenges.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, particularly in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001). It is characterized by three main dimensions: exhaustion, which involves feeling overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources; cynicism, which manifests as a negative or detached attitude toward one's work, often accompanied by a sense of disillusionment; and inefficacy, which reflects feelings of incompetence and a lack of accomplishment or productivity. This syndrome results from chronic exposure to stressors in the work environment and can significantly impact an individual's health, well-being, and job performance (Maslach et al., 2001).

A European study on vet mental wellbeing across two surveys (2018 & 2023) with over 26,000 participants highlighted ongoing challenges (Jansen et al., 2024). Despite progress in awareness, stress, mental health leave needs, and standardized wellbeing scores remained concerningly high. Their study pinpointed early-career and female vets across Europe as most vulnerable. This emphasized the need for improved work environments that prioritize wellbeing, work-life balance, and job satisfaction for veterinarians (Jansen et al., 2024).

Spitznagel et al. investigated if an educational program targeting reactions to difficult clients could reduce stress and burnout in

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veterinary staff. Staff from three animal hospitals were placed in intervention (training) or control groups (Spitznagel et al., 2022a). Those in the training group reported the program helpful and used the techniques frequently. While overall stress and burnout didn't significantly change, the intervention group showed a promising decrease in negative reactions to difficult clients, suggesting this approach may be beneficial for veterinary well-being (Spitznagel et al., 2022a).

A new, shorter survey (BTI-A) was developed to measure burden transfer, the stress vets experience from clients facing pet care challenges (Spitznagel et al., 2022b). Their survey was tested on vets and veterinary staff and found to be reliable and correlate with stress and burnout. The BTI-A could be a valuable tool for mental health professionals supporting veterinary teams (Spitznagel et al., 2022b).

The veterinary profession faces a burnout crisis (Steffey et al., 2023). Long hours, emotional strain, and financial pressures are driving vets and students out of the field. This not only impacts their well-being but also harms patient care and workplace morale. We need to change the culture and prioritize creating a sustainable and supportive work environment for veterinary professionals (Steffey et al., 2023).

A study investigated whether an acceptance and commitment training (ACT) program targeting reactions to difficult client interactions could reduce stress and burnout among veterinary healthcare teams (Beth Spitznagel et al., 2022). Veterinary hospital employees participated in either the ACT program or a control group. The ACT program consisted of educational sessions delivered virtually. Compared to the control group, participants who received the ACT program reported reduced burden transfer, stress, and burnout after the program and at a one-month follow-up. This suggests the program may be useful for reducing occupational distress in veterinary medicine, although further research is needed on broader dissemination methods (Beth Spitznagel et al., 2022).

A study investigated burnout among veterinary staff at a specialist animal hospital in Australia (Ashton-James, McNeilage, 2022). Despite high job satisfaction, many staff members reported burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low professional efficacy. Key stressors included heavy workload, communication problems, and challenging client interactions. In contrast, strong relationships with colleagues and meaningful work were associated with greater wellbeing and job satisfaction.

Chigerwe et al. surveyed veterinary interns, residents, and fellows (house officers) to assess mental wellbeing (2021). They found house officers experience burnout (emotional exhaustion and low accomplishment) but not high anxiety or depression. Their mental quality of life was lower than the average person. Work-life balance, finances, and emotional workload were all cited as stressors, highlighting a need for improved support programs.

A study explored delivering an ACT program (acceptance and commitment therapy) to veterinary teams to reduce stress and burnout (Spitznagel et al., 2023). Their program, offered in live or self-paced formats, showed positive results in reducing burden transfer, stress, and burnout for participants in both groups, regardless of delivery method. Their results suggested a web-based, self-paced version could be just as effective as the live program, offering greater flexibility and wider accessibility (Spitznagel et al., 2023).

A study found that regardless of the pet's condition (skin or cancer), a significant number of caregivers experienced emotional, physical, and financial burden (Silva et al., 2024). Factors like disease control, time since diagnosis, and caregiver age were more important than pet type, income, or treatment length. This highlighted the need for vets to consider caregiver well-being for optimal pet and owner care (Silva et al., 2024).

A UK study surveyed veterinary nurses to explore the impact of acute work-related fatigue (AWRF) on their well-being and the profession (Foxy, Orpet, 2024). Analyzing over 380 responses, the study found high AWRF levels, linked to factors like long shifts and lack of work-life balance. Conversely, support and a healthy work-life balance

correlated with lower fatigue. Notably, higher AWRF scores aligned with intentions to leave the profession. While limitations exist, the study suggests addressing AWRF could be crucial for retaining veterinary nurses (Foxy, Orpet, 2024).

The veterinary profession faces a critical mental health challenge with a high prevalence of burnout (Kogan et al., 2020; Varela, Correia, 2022). Immediate mental health support is essential for veterinarians to prevent burnout and promote their well-being. This review highlighted the emotional toll, financial pressures, and demanding work environment that contribute to stress and dissatisfaction. While interventions like communication skills training and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) show promise, a systemic change is needed. Veterinary practices must prioritize well-being by fostering supportive work cultures, promoting work-life balance, and creating sustainable career paths. This will not only benefit veterinary professionals but also ensure the well-being of animal patients and their caregivers.

Veterinarians face a multitude of pressures throughout their careers, leading to significant stress and burnout. To address this challenge, targeted intervention programs must focus on enhancing mental well-being among veterinary professionals. For example, implementing structured communication skills training can equip veterinarians with effective techniques for managing difficult client interactions, thereby reducing emotional strain. Additionally, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) programs should be offered in both live and self-paced formats to improve resilience in the face of workplace stressors. Regular workshops can also encourage knowledge-sharing and peer support, fostering a sense of community among veterinary teams. Moreover, utilizing tools like the Burden Transfer Indicator-Assessment (BTI-A) can help mental health professionals identify and address specific stressors. By prioritizing these interventions, veterinary practices can create a supportive environment that enhances job satisfaction and promotes overall well-being.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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