

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

The field of veterinary medicine has some significant differences from other professions. These differences create different responses unique to veterinary medicine. While other healthcare professionals have some similar struggles, veterinary professionals are the only healthcare professionals working with animals. With the unique challenges of veterinary medicine, veterinary professionals' struggles with well-being have often been overlooked. Learning about risk factors and the reasons behind the well-being crisis can help you better understand why your system may be reacting in a certain way. You can grow your resilient to the inherent risk of the field so that you can thrive as a veterinarian.

Emotions are like a little kid pulling on your pants leg when you are trying to talk to another adult. Sometimes, we finish what we are saying, ask what they want, and they say, "I forgot," and run off. Sometimes, they ask for a simple thing, and all is well. If we do not stop and ask those questions, they will start to throw tantrums and get louder and louder. In the same way, if we shove our emotions and never return to them, they begin to throw a tantrum and show up in ways that do not necessarily make sense. It is not always appropriate to respond to the toddler immediately. Sometimes we need to finish a conversation before checking in on them. This, too, is similar to emotions. It is impossible to cater to them at all times of the day, especially in a high-stress, fast-paced environment. It is okay and necessary sometimes to say, "Not right now, let me finish this, and I will get back to you." The most important part is actually checking in; otherwise, the emotions (and the kid) stop believing you.

In this book, we will explore the purpose of our emotions and reactions so that you can listen to them when needed. This insight will make the reactions feel less scary or broken and more accessible for change. We'll talk about what we can do to understand stress from a nervous system level so that you can nurture your nervous system and its natural reactions. Understanding why your body reacts the way it does to keep you safe gives you the power to manage the reaction. You can start to love your body system and its response instead of feeling broken or like it is tearing you down. Human kind has existed for many years, thanks to our nervous system and its reactions. I would love to keep it that way. As you start to understand your nervous system, you will also learn skills that you can use to nurture it, no matter how high the stress level is. You will learn how to communicate with your nervous system, not just your mind. This may feel counterintuitive to some, as you may have learned that managing thoughts makes emotions disappear. However, I am sure you have experienced times when, no matter how many skills you use to eliminate the feelings, they just won't go away. They are saying, "Hey dummy, you are in danger, listen to me." You are not listening, so they get louder.

Many of our reactions to situations are regulated by our body, more so than our brain. The communication pathways in our body are very complicated. The brain communicates to the body how to react, and the body communicates to the brain how to respond. When we focus solely on our super loud thoughts that seem factual, we miss a whole chunk of our reaction. We can tell our brain it is wrong all day long, but our body system stomps its feet and says, "No, you might die from this; listen to me!" Thoughts about situations are simply neurotransmitters firing, but they sometimes feel like cold, hard facts. An argument I often hear is, "Wait, are you saying my thoughts are

not important?” I would like to clarify that your thoughts are very important. You worked hard to build facts into your brain and to form working thoughts. I am speaking of the idea that there is a big, complicated mess underneath the thoughts, making them hard to manage. Thoughts based on our studies are factual. Thoughts based on reactions may not be. Understanding, changing, and managing body reactions can be simpler than making significant changes in your life, changing your thoughts, or trying to snap out of it. Notice how I said simpler, not simple. None of this stuff is easy.

While I acknowledge some structures and culture within the field that make well-being more challenging to obtain, the primary focus of this book will be on your response to the current realities in the field. Stress is not just a response to what is around you; it is the interaction between you and the environment (Lecce-Tosevski et al., 2011). If you cannot change your environment, your best bet is to change how you respond to it. When large changes can be made, this allows you to see more clearly. Once you can ground and feel less emotional, I encourage you to fight for the changes you feel need to be made. You can do this through advocacy, education, and open conversations with those around you. I can assure you that these conversations will be more effective when emotions are at a manageable level. The emotions mimicking a toddler throwing a tantrum don't always communicate effectively.

HOW DOES THIS LOOK FOR ME?

My burnout story is one that almost anyone in any kind of healthcare setting can likely relate to in some way. I caught it early enough that it was not as dire as it could have been, but I was on the way. I was working for an agency that brought me up as a young therapist. I drank their Kool-Aid and thought that I was a top-notch therapist working for them. I was doing 30-minute sessions that were mostly paperwork. I enjoyed learning, and I could receive training for free as long as it fit within the clinic's values. I also struggled to apply the skills given the clinic dynamics and the short sessions.

Over time, I realized I wasn't the quality therapist I thought I was. I was told it was impostor syndrome and that if I read the script, I was doing well. I thought this was what therapy looked like. It was all I knew. I started taking my clients' stories home, and I would worry and dream about them. I mentioned this to people around me, who told me to stop taking it so personally. (No skills were given, just a simple, “Well, stop it.”) I thought this was just part of being a therapist. I was told to take my lunches, and this would help. I also needed to get clinic hours and paperwork done, which sometimes required eating at my computer. I wasn't sure why I chose this career; it was not filling my cup. I started getting lazy and doing just enough to get by. This is outside of my values as well, but I got away with it, and looking back, I was trying to survive. The pay was something to be desired. I lived in what used to be a friend's closet to save on rent. When I spoke to others about the pay, they would often say, “I am not in it for the money,” so I felt ashamed thinking I should be paid more.

I started feeling like I needed to work just to work. I gave up on what used to give me passion, thinking it must have been delusional. At some point, I was encouraged to write down what is important to me at a job. I believe it was a team-building activity meant to bring us all together. As I looked at what was important, I started to see my job with new eyes. I re-established my routine to fit into my value system and asked for things important to me, like longer sessions and clients wanting to work through their trauma. I still had to do the paperwork, but I was able to establish something that fit my needs and values. If I asked, this particular clinic was okay with making adjustments (to an extent). I developed a work life that fit closer to my values. It still wasn't perfect, but at least things had changed at some level. I eventually left that position feeling like they could no longer give me the growth I needed, but I did not leave the field, and I did not leave because of burnout. I look back and I appreciate what this job gave me as a young therapist.

It felt good to know that I worked through the burnout and established well-being, only leaving when it was the right time, not as a way to run away. I was less knowledgeable about the nervous system then, but when I look back, I can point out ways my nervous system fought for safety as I lived outside of my values. I can see how each employee's nervous system responded to each other, sometimes pulling each other down when everyone was discouraged. I can see that I nurtured my nervous system without even realizing it. I started working toward my needs instead of what was told to me.

As I write this book, I notice all the bodily reactions. My brain says, "Yes, you have all this important information, and it is important to write it down so that other people can apply it to their lives." However, I sometimes think people will label me a fraud (hello, impostor syndrome). I have thoughts about this being a big flop. I feel excited that many veterinarians and people in the veterinary field will read this book and find life-changing messages. My excitement feels similar to fear, leading to thoughts that I might not get done or meet requirements. I feel vulnerable that all these concepts rolling around in my head will be on paper, and I will have no control over who reads this. Basically, I feel all the feelings. My brain argues with the feels, but I still have them, no matter how much I tell them to disappear.

These responses lead to writer's block, procrastination, and a desire to run as far away from my computer as possible. I have even caught myself sitting at my computer, staring into space. I have no control over these reactions I speak about; they are just there, but I can gain control over what I do with them and how much I let them control me. If you read this, I can only assume I worked through my nervous system responses. I built safety in these hard tasks, which sometimes feel like they might kill me. I finished the book.

These similar responses continue to show up in my work as a therapist. Sometimes, my personal life drains so much energy that working takes my last bit of energy. I am very good at powering through when needed, which can catch up to me during busy parts of my life. Due to all of these factors, I had times when I did not show up to work at my best. I have felt disconnected from the people I worked with, going through the motions of the day. I have come home irritable or anxious, bringing the stress of the workday to my nondeserving loved ones. I had periods of my career when I was isolated from others, saying I was just too exhausted for other people. Luckily, I made it out of the difficult seasons alive. I have the skills to notice when I am not at my best before I become completely shut down or frantic.

My reactions to writing this book and difficult times in my career are not much different than how your body reacts to getting ready for work, being at work, leaving work, and just being in the profession of veterinary medicine. We are all using these skills together. I am a therapist. However, I am also fallible. Will writing this book kill me? Will your job kill you just by being your job? No, I can't imagine it will, but there are times when my body thinks it will.

I have rewritten my routines as a therapist, and most days, I genuinely like my job. I am better at what I do than ever, and I hope to be even better 10 years from now than I am today. My hiccups are learning experiences, and believe me, I learn a lot. I regularly apply skills I teach in order to keep my passion, enjoy my career, and do what I do well. Sometimes I use the skills more than others. Sometimes I need them more than others. The good news is that they're always in my back pocket. When I notice activation that does not fit the facts of the situation, I have practiced enough that they are easily accessible.

MY HOPE FOR YOU

When this book was proposed to me, it took me some time to decide that I wanted to write it. What ultimately brought me to sign the contract was the idea of providing skills and information in a different format to create accessibility to well-being. Suppose one person in a clinic can feel more

like their authentic self. It can spread, and hopefully, one day the field of veterinary medicine can be a field where people thrive, live their love of animals, and no longer have to struggle in the career they chose and worked hard for. The culture of negativity and struggle can shift to one of passion and thriving. People no longer have to die in their misery; they can find a life worth living.

I have grand hopes for the field as a whole. I also have hope for you. I hope that you can apply the concepts of this book to understand yourself and your reactions and be the best veterinarian, employee, friend, partner, parent, handler, child, or whatever roles you have in your life you can be. You have the right to thrive as much as anyone else, and now is the time to do it.

I HOPE THAT YOU READ THIS BOOK AND:

- Gain acceptance of your whole self and your natural reaction to stress.
- Begin developing new patterns and routines that create safety, allowing your body to relax from the high-stress work environment that you are living in.
- Learn to use your reactions productively instead of feeling like they are “running the show.”
- Allow space for the passion that brought you into this field and got you through veterinary school.
- Gain happiness, passion, identity, and connection to yourself, animals, others, and nature.

The stress of the veterinary world does not have to take over your life. I want this book to help you settle into the life you hoped for, even if you cannot label what that would look like now. You can create a sense that your profession feeds you and makes you a better person, rather than feeling like it is tearing you down and making other parts of your life more complicated than they have to be.

REFERENCE

- Lecec-Tosevski, D., Vukovic, O. and Stepaniovic, J.
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 pp. 290–297.