

Mental Wellbeing and **Positive Psychology** for **Veterinary Professionals**

**A Pre-emptive, Proactive and
Solution-based Approach**



Laura Woodward

WILEY Blackwell

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To my Dad, who loved and believed in me through thick and thin, who proof-read my articles for years, and who laughed with me until the day he died.

To my children Theo and Zoe. Thank you for your encouragement and enthusiasm for this book, your insights and the numerous cups of tea you made for me while I wrote it.

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Foreword

Psychological happiness is the ability to maintain a state of peace and contentment whatever life throws at us. It gives us an anchor and a moral compass.

This is not another self-help book for when you are in crisis. This is not something to hand out to your staff like a Band-Aid when they have difficulties. It's designed to be a book for the individual, not a book to be lost amongst the other books on the dusty, groaning practice library shelf.

This is a book designed to help the veterinary workforce to enjoy life with all its twists and turns, using evidence-based methods. This is a pre-emptive and proactive book for when one is happy and wants to help others to thrive. It is for those amongst us who are in difficulty. It is for students prior to qualification, mental health first aiders, for line managers who want to lead with emotional intelligence in a productive way, as well as for those who want to learn about self-care in a career which will definitely challenge them.

This is for people who are happy and want some tools to help others, for people who want to lead from within the team and for those who are contemplating leaving the professions.

Why Are We Here?



WHY ARE WE HERE?

Laura
WOODWARD

- Suicide rates amongst vets are four times higher than the national average
- 20% of vets think 'very frequently' and 22% think 'often' about leaving the profession to achieve better work/life balance
- 87% of vets and nurses say that a counsellor who is a vet will understand them better than a normal counsellor

Seventy-five percent of vet students wouldn't want anyone to know if they were suffering from a mental health problem, compared to 41% of the general population.
Nearly 39% of vet students have experienced suicidal thoughts.

(above figures from Vet Futures BVA)

Forty-two percent of vets and veterinary nurses have considered leaving the professions.

Vets have four times the national rate of suicide. The suicide rate of veterinary nurses has not been widely reported (the figures shocking in their absence).

There's a pattern here from student to experienced professional.



Until recently, mental health concerns were taboo in the veterinary world. We have such a ‘can do’ attitude which we’re proud of. It’s fantastic that we are physically resilient. We don’t take a day off because of a cold, a broken leg or even when we go into labour early.

But is that taking it a bit too far?

‘Powering on through’ is the way I have worked for decades. If we continue this way, how on earth can our colleagues be open about having depression, anxiety or compassion fatigue?

It is nearly impossible to imagine what depression feels like unless you have suffered from it. Now, as a therapist, I am only just about able to comprehend how debilitating depression and anxiety are. It is harder to get out of bed and go to work when you are depressed than it is to go to work with a broken leg or when in early labour.

If you have never been depressed, you are lucky. Lucky enough to have the strength of mind to realise that you just don’t understand how hard it is for some of your close colleagues.

It’s okay to not be able to understand. The important thing is to accept that you can’t imagine how hard it is.



Doing a literature search for hypotheses as to why our professions are in such a state proved fruitless. The reasons will be multifactorial and there will be many differing opinions. My hypothesis is born out of what I have experienced through counselling scores of vets and vet nurses.

Many people in our professions grow up in families that place a big emphasis on achievement, in particular with parents who send mixed messages, alternating between overpraise and criticism. This can increase the risk of fraudulent feelings when we become adults. There can be a lot of confusion between approval and love and worthiness. Self-worth becomes contingent on achieving in these families.

So, as parents, it is our duty to attach our children's self-worth to more than just good grades or medals at football. Kindness is an achievement in kids too. So are empathy, self-regulation, resilience and the ability to be self-aware of our strengths and weaknesses.

Such 'soft skills' fly in the face of 'powering on through'.

But until we realise that true happiness is not solely reliant on social and professional status, we are doing ourselves and our young people a disservice.

I hear similar stories time and time again. Small person is praised for being clever because they can add up two dice in a board game or because they can count to a hundred. They are applauded for being clever, their parents are proud, their grandparents are proud. They get good grades throughout school and their teachers praise them for working so hard.

Achievements follow with maybe a few grade 8s in piano and violin along with grade 9s at GCSEs and A*s at A-level.

They get into vet school or medicine, dentistry or vet nursing and the applause continues.

They are seen as a whole and complete person because of their achievements and they believe it themselves.

But at no stage has anyone stopped to ask if they have good social skills? Do they have empathy?

Do they know how to fail? Or how to fail without falling apart? Do they even know what it feels like?

How are their coping skills for when things go wrong? Have they learnt resilience?

Then comes the workplace. Every day we will all fail to some degree. Usually it's tiny and not to the detriment of our patients. We aim to get it perfect, but we don't always achieve perfection. We have to cope with inexperience and the prospect of getting it wrong and failing. That prospect is paralysing to some new grads.

We need the best social skills of pretty much any profession I know. Loving animals isn't enough. If we don't love people, we'll get stuck because nearly every patient comes with at least one person attached.

We have to have the empathy and social skills to work with these owners, our receptionists, our vets, our nurses, our PCAs, vet students, work experience kids.

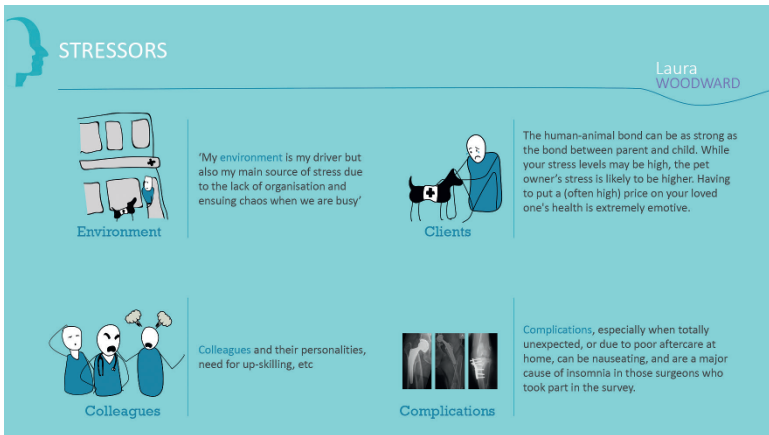
New graduate nurses and vets tell me about crippling fear of failure and insomnia. Then they get some more experience and suffer from imposter syndrome: a lonely place to be.

It's exhausting learning social skills and empathy on the job and they suffer from depersonalisation and compassion fatigue. If only they had been taught these soft skills as a child or as a student.

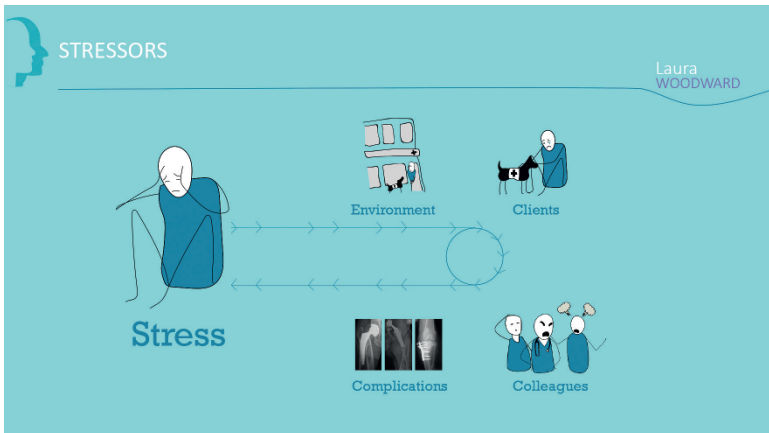
To the leaders and managers, you weren't there when your employees were growing up. But you *are* there now when the new grad turns up or when your student nurses start. Open pre-emptive discussions about mental health, difficulties which will arise, positive psychology, coping tools and tools for joy will be the best welcome gift you can give these employees to help them form cohesive teams and take our professions forward with a determination to be happier and change our god-awful statistics.

If we were doing enough, doing the right things or doing enough of the right things, our suicide rate would be going down.

What are the major stressors at work?



Survey of 40 members of BVOA (British Veterinary Orthopaedic Assoc.)
 Survey Monkey 2016.



This is a typical day at work for many of us; it's busy or chaotic, our pet owners are understandably stressed or sad and they may pass that onto us, not everything will proceed without complication, there may be people you have to work with who you don't like.

However, it is possible to have the crazy busy day, the difficult clients, the surgical revision and the grumpy colleague and still be happy and joyful. It takes effort and the knowledge of where to place that effort.

How the Book and Ideas Were Developed



This book has been developed over about six years. For my entire career, I have spent most of my time at work ensconced in the operating theatre with one other person for hours at a time. This ‘other person’ changes all the time.

As most vets and vet nurses know, there’s something about theatre that brings out the deepest of conversations. Maybe it’s because the surgeon and the anaesthetist are both masked up and focused on their different tasks rather than facing each other straight on, and we are therefore a bit oblivious to each other’s facial reactions to us.

As therapists, we are trained to not face the client directly but rather to sit at an angle to them. It’s easier to speak truthfully to someone if you can comfortably avoid eye contact and if you feel you aren’t being interrogated. It’s the opposite of the interrogation room in any TV cop drama.

Or maybe it’s because there’s an unwritten rule that what’s said in theatre stays in theatre.

I became fascinated with human thoughts and behaviours out of a genuine interest in my colleagues’ differing stories.

Then I had children. Their developing minds blew *my* mind, and their learnt and innate behaviours mesmerised me.

I also had adults in my life with difficulties, personality disorders and misbehaviours, as well as other adults who were resilient, compassionate and fun.

This gave me a passion for psychology and I studied to become a counsellor over several years while working.

Because of my children, I specialised in child and adolescent therapy. I then went on to study Buddhist psychotherapy because of the way it looks at our cognitive, energetic and physical being. I love its holistic approach. I also qualified as a mindfulness practitioner and a positive psychologist.

I have been writing for *Veterinary Practice* magazine for over six years and I am very grateful to them for allowing me to use some of the materials I wrote for them in this book.

I still wanted to do more to help to change the mindset of our professions. We are not doing the right things, or enough of the right things, to improve our horrific statistics of mental health crises, burnout and suicide. If we were, the statistics would be improving.

It was after the publication of an article I wrote in *Vet Times* in 2022 on the neuroscience of suicide that Wiley contacted me to ask me to write this book, and for this I'm also indebted. I have tried to collate all the knowledge I have gleaned from my many mentors, lecturers, leaders and counselling patients over the last decade and place it here in your hands.

I have designed the book to be portable enough to carry around with you, comfortable enough to read in bed, and concise enough that you don't have to go trawling through the internet for some help specific to our professions.

I hope that you will dip in and out of it many times, each time finding something new which applies to you or which you can use to help someone else.

Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions.

Dalai Lama

How to Use This Book

This edition is designed to be carried around with you, read first thing in the morning and at night-time, dipped into on the bus or train and while at work.

An essential part of any mental health first aider's reading, this book tackles multiple difficulties specific to our veterinary world, and also many others which are part of our often tumultuous life outside work.

Nothing is taboo in this easy-to-follow, gentle but firmly proactive guide to investigating your own emotions and learning to deal with them in a way that works for you.

In between a stimulus and our reaction there is a space. In that space lies our freedom to choose our response. Therein lies our freedom.

Viktor Frankl

This book will teach you how to recognise the stimulus and how to pause to make the space large enough to choose your own reactions, both internal and external, in order that you'll be happy with your choices. Instead of continuing on autopilot, reacting reflexively and regretting your actions, you will learn to react reflectively in a way which will ultimately make life more enjoyable for you and for those around you.

Part One: Strategies explains effective strategies for dealing with frequent and not so frequent difficulties in our lives, with our multiple roles being taken into consideration and being a reality.

It covers the basics of Mindfulness, Emotional Intelligence, Empathy and so much more, but explained so that we can understand them in a logical fashion and actually apply them in real life today.

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