

Mental Health in Veterinary Medicine

Lindsay White

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Background of Plantation Animal Hospital

In December 2020, I joined Plantation Animal Hospital as an assistant veterinary technician while I was transferring schools. I knew I wanted to work with animals but was unsure what exactly I wanted to do for my future career. I decided to live on Hilton Head Island, SC, for nine months and work at this hospital. They trained me in all the skills necessary to work at their facility. Plantation Animal Hospital is home to four veterinarians and eight full time technicians and assistant technicians. This animal hospital is unique because it is only one of three on the island that is home to roughly 50,000 full time residents and almost 300,000 tourists in the summer.

During May 2022, I rejoined the hospital staff to intern for this capstone project. For my project, I wanted to work towards giving back to the office and staff that taught me so many invaluable skills. I decided to focus on mental health within veterinary medicine, giving special attention to stress and anxiety of both pets and staff in the office. I recalled numerous hectic and stressful days due to emergencies and constantly being understaffed. Wanting to leave behind tools to help deal with stress and anxiety in veterinary medicine, I compiled a manual during my time there.

Mental Health in Veterinary Medicine

Mental health in the field of veterinary medicine is a concerning issue that deserves attention and solutions. Having experienced the stresses of veterinary medicine firsthand, I decided to choose this topic as the focus of my internship project.

Veterinary medicine is a profession that is continuously short staffed. To bolster this fact, only "41 percent of veterinarians would recommend the profession to a friend or family member" (AVMA 2018). The stress, anxiety, and overall mental health impacts the world of veterinary medicine has on its working professionals may be to blame. According to the AVMA, "5.3 percent of the veterinary profession is suffering severe psychological distress" (AVMA 2018).

I have personally witnessed the emotional and mental fatigue of the technicians and veterinarians whom I work alongside. There are frequent emotionally and physically exhausting days, without adequate coping strategies in place. Acknowledging that mental health deserves attention in the workplace of a veterinary hospital and providing solutions and resources is vital to the longevity of veterinarians, technicians, and the industry.

Internship Role: Assistant Veterinary Technician

The average appointment consisted of the following steps:

- Check in and weigh patient: weighing the patient is an important first step in entering vitals into the computer system.
- Escort the patient and pet owner into the exam room for intake: obtain and record the patient history into the computer. Ask about eating habits, water intake, medication types and dosages, behavioral changes, and any other relevant information needed for the doctor and the appointment. If it is an annual visit, confirm the vaccines and tests that need updating with the owner.
- Escort any sick patient to the hospital lab for testing, including urinalysis and bloodwork.
- For annual and routine appointments: go to the back and select and prepare the needed vaccines for the veterinarian. Restrain the patient for the doctor in the room for the exam.

Some skills I learned include:

- Blood draws from the legs and jugular veins of dogs
- Administering vaccines
- Conducting X-rays
- Restraining both cats and dogs
- Running different blood, fecal, ear, and urine tests
- Technician tasks such as nail trimming and ear cleaning
- Cleaning and scaling teeth during dental procedures
- Running the computer system Corner Stone and checking out patients

Identifying Stress and Anxiety in Pets

Identifying stress and anxiety of the animal patients was another important aspect of my project. I wanted to educate staff and pet owners alike on how to recognize the symptoms of stress in their pets at home and in the office. I chose to focus on cats and dogs as these are the primary animals seen at Plantation Animal Hospital.

For dogs, I discussed the following indicators of stress:

- Hiding, escaping, or avoidance behaviors
- Changes in posture, eyes, or ears
- Excessive panting, pacing, yawning, drooling, or licking
- Excessive shedding
- Changes in bodily functions such as bowel movements and urination
- Vocalizing and barking or whining
- Destructive or aggressive behaviors

Additionally, I included the following signs of stress in cats:

- Unusual and uncharacteristic urination or defecation
- Vocalization such as meowing, hissing, or growling
- Excessive grooming
- Uncharacteristic aggression
- Dilated pupils, widened eyes, flattened ears, lowered head, quiet tail



Myself and technicians and assistant technicians Robin, Brynn, Hillary, and Jacquelin, Dr. Trelease holding her dachshund Roxy and receptionist Addison

Common Stress and Anxiety Disorder in Dogs and Solutions

For dogs, I highlighted separation anxiety. Separation anxiety occurs when dogs become overly attached or dependent to their owners. Dogs may exhibit signs of separation anxiety and display distress behaviors when their owner is about to leave or has left. Ways to improve a dog's separation anxiety include the following:

- Ensure your new puppy or dog has crate time away from you so they do not become overly dependent when you are away.
- Enrichment: this will help keep their mind occupied while you are away. This may include food-toys or puzzles.
- Routine: if your dog can predict your daily routine this will help your dog feel more secure when you depart. Examples include, when you leave for work, when they are fed, and when walk time occurs.
- Training: rewarding behaviors such as 'calm' or 'settle' will help with relaxation techniques for your pet. Additionally, you will be able to use these commands with your companion when required.

Myself and Otto, one of the veterinarian's puppies



An X-ray I took of a small dog's bladder stones



Common Stress and Anxiety Disorder in Cats and Solutions

For cats, I wanted to focus on Pica as a common stress and anxiety-based disorder. Pica is described as a disorder that causes the person or animal to chew or digest inedible objects on a regular basis. The main cause of Pica in cats is anxiety but may attributed to nutritional or enrichment deficiencies. Household items which may be harmful if ingested by a cat include the following:

- Fabrics and paper: look for torn clothing items, furniture, or other cloth objects such as lampshades.
- Electrical cords
- Toys: cats normally chase toys, pick them up, toss them around, or even chew on these as part of their natural hunting instincts.

Pica can be exceptionally dangerous if the foreign body becomes trapped in the animal's digestive tract. This may require surgical removal of the object.

Results: Mental Health Resource Book and Strategies

I divided my resource manual into two major sections. One for humans and the other for dogs and cats. The section for humans focused on the negative impacts of stress and anxiety as well as ways to mitigate those effects. Stress is a normal response to environmental stimulus. However, signs of excess stress include headaches, jaw clenching, chest pains, weight loss, high blood pressure, muscle tension, trouble sleeping (Insomnia), exhaustion, and dry mouth. Some strategies I included in the manual are exercising, lowering caffeine intake, self care, and cutting back on screen time. For simple methods to alleviate stress in the workplace, I brought in slime, chocolate, and a joke jar for the staff. All three activities have related studies showing they are simple and effective ways of lowering stress and anxiety levels, helping to reduce symptoms. The final chapter of my human section was a compilation of local and national mental health resources.

The animal section of my research manual consisted of the signs and symptoms of stress in dogs and cats as listed previously. Included in this section of the manual are articles on Pica in cats and separation anxiety in dogs. Furthermore, I gave detailed presentations on these topics to the hospital staff for their use with our clients.

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Plantation Animal Hospital for allowing me to work and gain exposure to veterinary medicine. Thank you to my manager, Katie Whalen, who hired me amid the uncertain times of pandemic. Additionally, special thanks to Dr. Trelease, Dr. Parnell, Dr. Cohen, and Dr. Senn for teaching me what it means to be an exceptional veterinarian and answering my endless questions along my journey.

Thank you, Dr. Wood, for helping me with my approval for this project and my questions over the summer and this semester.