



“I shouldn’t have missed that diagnosis.”

“How could I have forgotten to send that medication home?”

“I’m not giving my patients the care that they deserve.”

“I am a horrible veterinarian.”

Combating Veterinary Perfectionism: The Practice of Self-Compassion

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We are often our own worst critics. How frequently do you say hurtful things to yourself like the statements above? Would you speak to a close friend in this same way?

Perfectionism and self-criticism are extremely common among veterinarians and can result in poor wellbeing. To address perfectionism, we must recognize that it is occurring and choose to decrease our perfectionist tendencies. One tool to combat perfectionism is the practice of self-compassion.

What Is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism can be defined as having unrealistic expectations of yourself and/or others, and increased levels of perfectionism have been correlated with anxiety and depression.¹ Perfectionism can be classified into three components:

- **Self-oriented perfectionism is setting extremely high standards for oneself.**

- **Other-oriented perfectionism is setting unrealistic standards for others.**
- **Socially prescribed perfectionism is feeling the need to live up to high standards set by others.²**

Perfectionism in the Veterinary Profession

Anecdotally, perfectionism appears to be extremely common within the veterinary profession, and perfectionist tendencies are often rewarded or encouraged as early as the pre-veterinary stage.

Consider the entrance into veterinary school. Veterinary schools are extremely competitive; to achieve acceptance into veterinary school, students may feel the need and desire to be perfect in their coursework or standardized testing. The rigorous veterinary curriculum often demands perfectionism, and a big mistake can feel career-ending!

Recently, I was speaking with several veterinary students who acknowledged some of the poor mental health outcomes of perfectionism but stated that they would rather continue being perfectionists because it was the only way to succeed in veterinary school. They perceived that making a mistake was not accepted or tolerated.

Upon entering practice, veterinarians might feel the need to be perfect in treating their patients as a mistake could be life-threatening. Every step along the veterinary journey, perfectionism often feels necessary, but is it healthy and sustainable for the veterinarian?


Veterinary Wellbeing and Perfectionism

Perfectionist tendencies have the potential to create stress for veterinarians. A study measuring perfectionism in veterinarians in Australia demonstrated that those who had higher levels of perfectionism were at a higher risk for distress from moral dilemmas.³ In this same study, veterinarians who had low levels of perfectionism did not report an increase in their stress after experiencing morally significant events. Having higher levels of perfectionism could result in more work-related stress which in turn has the potential to cause burnout among veterinarians.

In a study done in the U.K., mistakes were often perceived as extremely stressful for new veterinary graduates, and several veterinarians even considered changing careers after an error was made.⁴ Given the elevated suicide rate within the veterinary profession compared to the general population,⁵ it is important to assess what factors may be contributing to this issue. A meta-analysis on the relationship between suicide and perfectionism found that there may be an association between perfectionism and suicide.⁶

Perfectionism that is directed at others has

the potential to create stress and conflict in the veterinary practice. If a client does not follow through perfectly on treatment recommendations or if a veterinary team member is not meeting the unrealistically high expectations of the veterinarian, a veterinarian with high levels of perfectionism may feel frustrated, stressed, or angry.



“To promote veterinary wellbeing, it is vital that we begin to address perfectionism within the profession.”

Red Flags of Perfectionist Thinking

The first step of addressing perfectionism is to recognize that it is occurring. By monitoring the words that you say to yourself, you may notice a few red flags for perfectionism. Individuals who are perfectionists may often find themselves saying words like:



Should




Shouldn't



Have to



Must



Supposed to



Can't

Often individuals with high levels of perfectionism have very black and white thinking. This can lead to difficulty and frustration when circumstances don't meet expectations that have been set for oneself or others. Here are some additional red flags - that may indicate that you have high levels of perfectionism:

- Even after achieving a goal, you feel unfulfilled.
- You feel like you are not good enough.
- You have to do everything perfect, good is not enough.
- You feel that your self-worth is measured by what you achieve.⁷

Self-Compassion: An Antidote to Perfectionism

Kristen Neff, an expert on self-compassion, describes it as a way of being kind to yourself. By treating yourself like you would a close friend or loved one, you avoid self-criticism of your mistakes or perceived inadequacies.⁸

A large body of research in self-compassion⁹ suggests that it may promote mental health and wellbeing. The practice of self-compassion can be extremely helpful for veterinarians who have high levels of perfectionism. **Self-compassion consists of three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.**

1. Self-kindness

Self-kindness is the ability to be kind to yourself even in the face of mistakes, failures, or imperfections. When practicing self-kindness, try to talk to and console yourself like you would a close friend. You would not say to a close friend, "I can't believe you messed up again." Instead of self-judgment, offering kind words to yourself can help you work through difficult experiences.

A few phrases that you might say to yourself include:



2. Common Humanity

Common humanity means that you are able to realize that you are not suffering alone. There are many others that go through similar experiences or challenges. By being able to shift your perspective away from feelings of isolation, you will begin to recognize that difficulties, imperfections, and suffering are a part of a normal human life and many others may be having shared experiences.

Here are a few phrases that you might say to yourself to cultivate a sense of common humanity:



3. Mindfulness

The third component of self-compassion is cultivating mindfulness. Mindfulness is being aware of the present moment, without judgment. Kristen Neff suggests that you should allow yourself to be mindful of feelings and thoughts you may be experiencing in the moment without trying to suppress, judge, or over-identify with them.

A few mindfulness practices that may be helpful during times of stress include:

- [Guided self-compassion meditations*](#)
- [A short body scan practice**](#)
- [Square-breathing***](#)

Other Resources for Recovering Veterinary Perfectionists

In addition to self-compassion, it is important to note that there are many additional tools available to individuals who would like to decrease their perfectionism. Here are a few additional resources to consider:

- **Seek professional help from a mental health professional:** Mental health professionals will be able to help you identify the root cause of your perfectionism and can also give you individualized tips and recommendations on recovering from perfectionism.
- **Mindfulness-based stress reduction:** Mindfulness-based stress reduction courses can teach you how to become more mindful in your daily living. Mindfulness can be extremely helpful to those with perfectionism.
- **Seeking a mentor:** A mentor can be a good supporter and advocate

for you if you are struggling with perfectionism. Promoting wellbeing is one of the many benefits of having a supportive mentor!

- **Joining a veterinary mentorship program:** Structured mentorship programs such as MentorVet can allow you to connect with others who may be experiencing similar feelings which can cultivate a sense of common humanity. This could help decrease your feelings of isolation.

Conclusion

Perfectionism, which is having unrealistically high expectations of yourself or others, seems to occur commonly within the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians with high levels of perfectionism may have higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing, especially when faced with the inevitable challenges of practice— heavy workload, mistakes, unexpected outcomes, and ethical dilemmas.

Self-compassion—self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—can all be beneficial tools to help decrease perfectionism. Self-compassion is just one tool that can be used to help perfectionists.

There are many other tools available including seeking help from a mental health professional and veterinary mentorship programs.

By recognizing perfectionism as an issue within the veterinary profession, we can begin to take steps to address perfectionism not only at the individual level but also within our industry, including veterinary practices and veterinary schools.

Creating systemic change is key to promoting wellbeing in the veterinary profession.

About the Author



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