

A photograph of a person in a green canoe with a dog on a misty lake at sunrise. The person is holding a paddle. The background shows a forest and a misty horizon. Large, semi-transparent text is overlaid on the image.

STAYING ON AN EVEN KEEL

Strategies for
Maintaining Equilibrium
in the Practice

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This article was crafted from discussions at last year's wellness bistros. 'Sask Vets' (practice owners, managers, associates, RVTs and clinic staff from across the province) shared their strategies for keeping their practice wellness afloat.

CULTIVATE A POSITIVE ATMOSPHERE

Attitudes are contagious and positivity breeds positivity. Just as with dress codes, as the practice owner, you set the tone. Your demeanor has more influence than you think.

- Respect staff and be realistic. You all undergo tough experiences and stress. Acknowledge each other's stress -that's taking a community approach to wellness.
- Emotional weather reports at staff meetings: each person presents a 'weather report' saying what the forecast is for themselves now and later that day in meteorological terms. It's an upbeat, supportive way to check in with your staff.
- Let staff meetings be fun and revisit your practice's mission/core values periodically.
- Openly advocate for a culture of positivity- it's contagious. Be willing to change the way you do things if doing them differently would improve things in challenge areas.

A practice is like a family, and families all need some fun to round things out and keep stress at bay.

- Have staff outings regularly (ie: quarterly). Share videos at lunchtime. Work a little fun into the day. The staff will surely have lots of ideas of their own.
- Take/post staff photos in your staff area. Make sure everyone's represented.
- Encourage staff to make/bring healthy snacks to share. Have a potluck or take turns.
- Create healthy staff challenges-score points for fitness, eating enough servings of veggies a day, etc. Consider a gym membership as a staff prize, perk or even added to compensation packages. Some local gyms may be willing to negotiate a group membership for your practice. It's worth a phone call to find out.
- Celebrate self-care: a quiet night at home, socializing with friends, attending a concert or anything else that your staff members enjoy on their off time is part of their personal formula for balance and should be respected.

KEEP WORK HOURS UNDER CONTROL

Your work time is a resource. The following strategies can help you make the best use of it:

- Prioritize your 'to-do' list - delegate what others can/are allowed to do.

- Do small, easy things first to get 'warmed up' and shorten your list fast
- Toss useless stuff – like when cleaning a home, get rid of the junk. Time-wasters need to go.
- Organize realistic day schedules with appointments, jobs that need doing, and prep time (start, before lunch and end of day). One clinic books 30 minutes of catch up time in every 8 hour shift to finish calls and files so they can leave shifts on time without leaving work undone or taking it home. Others book an hour.
- Acknowledge to yourself what you have done! (The glass is half-full....)

LEAVING WORK ON TIME

Everyone agrees that getting away from the practice reasonably close to the end of a shift goes a long way toward basic sanity. It may not be possible to leave on time every day, but the following ideas help some SaskVets:

- Make a habit of trying to do things as they come rather than putting things off until later (example: doing exam notes during appointment time).
- When you are low on time at the end of the day, do only emergency or necessary items on the to-do list. Everything else gets 'demoted'.
- Close your practice and turn phones off at least 30 minutes before shifts end to finish needed daily tasks.
- If you have an important engagement, consider booking the afternoon off so you're not preoccupied and stressed about leaving on time.
- When possible, walk home - in daylight. Sunshine helps you unwind better than darkness.

'GETTING OUT OF DODGE'

We all need to 'unplug' from our work life on a regular basis. That basis may not be daily, or even weekly (especially for practice owners). Some people only really get centred if they leave town for a few days. One veterinarian refers to this as 'getting out of Dodge'. When she's at home/in town, the practice rules 24/7. She needs to get completely away to get that needed break.

DEFLATE STRESSORS

ON-CALL

On-call time presents a challenge. SaskVets suggest you include on-call time as part of your work schedule. Being mentally prepared and having meals prepared is ideal. Choose activities that are flexible and

allow you to get in much needed fun, but still allow you to respond as needed to your practice.

INTRUSIVE COMMUNICATION

There were some funny and not so funny anecdotes from SaskVets who found they were being barraged during their off-time by 'urgent' phone calls or persistent emailers. It seemed that everyone had at least one story about a client calling, texting or emailing to personal numbers or outside of business hours.

Having a practice policy about phone numbers and emails protects everyone. Business lines take messages and allow you to advise/refer in emergencies. You may work at a 24-hour practice- but you are not the practice. Be up front about your limits – you have a right to them. Be perfectly clear in your own mind about why those limits are in place and abide by them yourself. Respecting a limit and the logic behind it is as important for you as it is for others. When you are confident in laying down a boundary, others will take their cue from you and respect it.

Round-the clock availability is a persisting expectation that many clients have of rural veterinarians (and that many rural vets have of themselves). Turning off the phone at a specific time may not seem like a viable option. It's hard to refer to after hours or emergency services when you provide those services. Collaboration with other practitioners can effectively spread out the load (and despite what some people think, clients are very unlikely to leave their vet and go to a new one). Of course, there will always be vet-hopping clients no matter what you do. It comes down to deciding how much is worth it to you to worry about/feel in control of.

Whatever you decide your practice boundaries are, train clients to respect them (phone calls, texting, emails, general availability) by being consistent and communicating these limits without guilt. One clinic has their policies framed and hanging proudly in the waiting area. This is a smart, friendly way to educate clients. Clients who transgress won't be caught off guard when you refer to them. They also give you an external reference point in confrontational situations. Can poorly behaved clients be 'fired'? Sask Vets at the wellness bistros agreed: poorly behaved /repeat offenders can indeed be fired.

ANGRY CLIENTS

People usually want to be heard, first and foremost, so listen. Repeat back to them what you are hearing to help them make clear what they are upset about. If they're

angry, try not to take it personally.

How people express their angry feelings is not your concern (they may actually not even be angry with you/the clinic) unless or until their behaviour 'crosses the line'. If it does, you should act accordingly to affirm your clinic's codes of behaviour.

If their emotional behaviour is non-threatening, your job is to acknowledge and problem-solve. Try to empathize with the client and keep in mind that you're not meeting them on their best day. You never know what someone may be dealing with in their life, and a veterinary emergency certainly adds stress.

There's no benefit to making a client (or anyone) guilty in your mind- they are human and so are you. Having that perspective allows you to roll with mistakes, yours and others'. Stay positive by thinking about your unique ability to help someone during their time of need - not by buying into some sense of obligation to be a doormat.

NEGATIVE ONLINE COMMENTS

Limit the interactive use of social media. Your practice social media accounts are best used for to provide information, show fun photos and tell stories. Just like your website, social media perform the function of promoting your business and building a relationship with your community.

If you get a negative post from a client, respond to them privately by offering a phone call and/or meeting and then delete the post. **DO NOT ENGAGE WITH CLIENTS IN A PUBLIC FORUM.**

YOU'VE MADE A MISTAKE

Medical mistakes are going to happen, but it's how you deal with them that determines how they impact your relationship with the client. Communication is critical, and most times an apology is what the client wants most and goes a long way in diffusing the situation. Tell them why the mistake occurred, and if possible, the steps you and the staff are going to take to ensure it won't happen again.

There is an additional factor, known as the 'second victim' condition¹, where clinicians involved in errors and other adverse events report feelings of shame, anger, failure, depression, inadequacy, and loss of confidence; some even report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. If/when a mistake is made, the response a veterinarian or vet tech has will vary with the individual, but colleagues need to know that some type of reaction is normal and worthy of peer support. Sask Vets recommend giving yourself the gift of failure and recovery. Mistakes happen on the road to learning. Not a one of us is exempt from the process.

Interestingly, from a business perspective, your practice's efforts to make good on a mistake actually do more for its reputation than had the mistake never happened at all. It may seem counterintuitive, but it's true. People are actually more loyal to a business they know cares about its clients and patients than a business that has all perfect reviews. Why? Because it's authentic.²

FIND YOUR EQUILIBRIUM

DOES 'WORK-LIFE BALANCE' EVEN EXIST?

Even for those who have been in practice for 30+ years, it seems a never-ending struggle to achieve the seemingly elusive 'work-life balance', but if we think of it as more of a work-life *equilibrium* it immediately becomes more attainable.

There is no such thing as a "work-life balance" because the scale is always going to be tipped in one direction or the other. Picture a canoe tipping a little back and forth as it glides forward. The canoe's balance is challenged on a constant basis, but as the canoers adjust their positions and paddling, equilibrium is maintained. Acknowledge to yourself when you are upset. Then, have some strategies to help you regain your equilibrium, in your own way. Some may be:

- Make sure that there is more to your life than only work so that you have outlets – family, friends, hobbies, activities, interests outside of veterinary medicine. Have a group of friends who aren't part of the vet community who want to talk about things other than your work.
- Push yourself to say yes to experiences like yoga, a concert, night out with friends or a weekend trip.
- Prioritize a hobby or exercises that help you to de-stress. Every person has different activities that help them unwind.
- Activities with repetition or patterns can reduce stress. Running, biking, meditation or breathing exercises quiet the mind and release negative energy.

FAMILY DEMANDS

Families are part of the landscape for any workplace. Prioritizing family life and giving permission for the need to change/cancel work-related commitments to attend to the needs of family is a real need.

Most SaskVets are parents. Children are usually adaptable, understanding and supportive of work schedules, but if you have young children, some SaskVets suggest making your kids your priority because 'you won't ever get this time back with them'. You

may want to consider working part time or shortened days. This may require a conversation with the practice owner, especially if they do not have children themselves.

Partners and aging parents are part of the family too, and will have need of your time as well.

SELF CARE

Diet, sleep, exercise, sexuality, hobbies and interests – remember to honour and care for yourself. All those things matter to our sense of wellbeing. Wellness is an evolving process- your wellness needs can and will change throughout life. Continue paying attention to your internal cues and honour them.

Thank you to everyone who came out to the Wellness Bistros to socialize with colleagues and share so many great and helpful ideas! It takes effort to do what's good for us and going out to social events when we're tired is no exception.

Look for 'Wellness Strategies in Practice' at www.svma.sk.ca on the Member Health & Wellness page. Add your ideas by emailing sgauthier@svma.sk.ca. Everyone has pearls of wisdom to share. Your stories may not seem exceptional to you, but they will be inspiring to others. 🙌

REFERENCES:

1. **Second Victims: Support for Clinicians Involved in Errors and Adverse Events Patient Safety Network Primer** <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/30/second-victims-support-for-clinicians-involved-in-errors-and-adverse-events>
2. **Enhancing Public Perception of the Veterinary Profession (seminar, Feb 24, 2018; Edmonton AB) Dr Kyle Murray, Vice Dean, Alberta School of Business**

SUGGESTED READING:

- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Free Press/1989) by Stephen R Covey**