

In a career full of animals, it's all about the people - mental fitness for veterinary professionals

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Mental health challenges among veterinary professionals in New Zealand represent a critical concern, with research revealing alarming trends. Veterinary nurses report overwhelming rates of stress (94%) and compassion fatigue (82%), with nearly one-third turning to substances to cope. Meanwhile, veterinarians face a suicide rate four times higher than the general population.

Career sustainability is increasingly precarious—only 40% of veterinarians and 26% of nurses expect to remain in the profession until retirement. Early-career professionals appear particularly vulnerable, facing significant stigma and barriers to seeking help. Despite showing resilience during global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the profession urgently requires targeted mental health interventions and support systems to address these concerning patterns.

These concerning statistics highlight a profession in crisis, but there are evidence-based approaches that can help. One powerful approach gaining traction is the concept of mental fitness—a framework that can help veterinary professionals build resilience against the unique stressors they face daily.

You know what makes your day stressful, but how can you better cope with it? Consider how fitness applies to both body and mind. Just as physical fitness allows you to climb steep hills without physical strain, mental fitness builds your capacity to effectively navigate life's challenges. The parallel is powerful: when you're physically fit, a hill that once left you breathless becomes an easy climb; similarly, when you're mentally fit, situations that once overwhelmed you become manageable. When you become mentally fit, the stressors in your day don't disappear—but your ability to handle them transforms.

Stress

Mental fitness offers significant benefits for managing both the acute and chronic stressors prevalent in the veterinary profession, enabling veterinarians and veterinary nurses to better navigate the demands of their work.

Application to acute stress

- Veterinarians and veterinary nurses frequently face acute stressors such as emergency cases, unexpected negative outcomes, and difficult interactions with distressed or demanding clients.
- Mental fitness practices can help veterinarians to remain calm and focused during these high-pressure situations. This aligns with the concept of creating a 'space' between a stressful event and one's reaction.
- In situations involving conflict with clients regarding treatment options or costs, mental fitness can enhance communication, negotiation, and mediation skills, allowing for a more measured and effective response, rather than an automatic emotional reaction.
- The ability to regulate emotional responses is crucial when dealing with verbal abuse or emotional blackmail from clients. Enhanced mental fitness enables observing these interactions without internalising the negativity, thus mitigating the acute stress response.

Application to chronic stress

- The veterinary profession is known for chronic stressors such as long working hours, heavy workloads, being on-call, and the constant responsibility for animal lives. The 'Rethinking Veterinary Education' report even calls the situation a crisis due to unsustainable approaches and increasing demands.
- The chronic stress associated with performing euthanasia, especially 'convenience euthanasia', and managing the moral conflicts between client expectations and animal welfare can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout. Consistent mental fitness practices can build resilience to these ongoing pressures by helping process these emotionally weighted experiences and protecting against emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation.
- The feeling of minimal support available can exacerbate chronic stress. Mental fitness can empower individuals with better self-regulation skills to manage their emotional responses even in the absence of external support. Moreover, it can enhance the ability to mobilise existing social support networks.
- Addressing the normalisation of stress within the veterinary culture is also important. By promoting mental fitness and wellbeing, the profession can shift the perception that stress is simply 'part of the job' towards a culture that prioritises psychological health. This is more effective psychosocial risk management.

In essence, mental fitness provides veterinarian professionals with tools to not only navigate the immediate challenges of their demanding profession with greater clarity and emotional regulation but also to build long-term resilience against the cumulative effects of chronic stress, ultimately contributing to their overall wellbeing and the sustainability of the profession.

The science of mental fitness

Mental fitness is a vital component of overall well-being, drawing from disciplines such as sports psychology, cognitive behavioural theory (CBT), neuroscience, and positive psychology. Sports psychology enhances resilience through techniques like visualisation and goal-setting, which improve focus and performance. CBT supports individuals in identifying and reframing negative thought patterns, encouraging healthier behaviours and emotional regulation. Neuroscience reveals the brain's adaptability through neuroplasticity, demonstrating that mental exercises can strengthen cognitive function and emotional stability. Positive psychology emphasizes strengths, gratitude, and optimism, fostering a balanced and fulfilling life. Together, these fields provide a comprehensive framework for cultivating mental fitness, empowering individuals to thrive across various aspects of life.

At the core of neuroscience-based understanding of mental fitness is the interplay between two opposing brain networks. The Default Mode Network (DMN) is active during internal mental activities such as self-referential thinking, mind-wandering, and inner dialogue. Increased DMN activity is associated with negative emotional responses and judgement. Stress enhances the functional connectivity between the DMN and the amygdala. Hyperactivity in specific DMN regions is linked to ruminative brooding, a central feature of Major Depressive Disorder. In contrast, the Task-Positive Network (TPN) activates during attention-demanding tasks like planning and problem-solving. Positivity is associated with mindful, externally focused TPN activity. These networks operate in dynamic opposition: as activity in one increases, the other typically decreases.

Neuroplasticity describes the brain's ability to alter its structure and function in response to experience. Regular mental fitness practice can lead to structural changes in the brain, such as increased grey matter in TPN regions associated with better control of internal chatter, improved white matter connectivity, and reduced grey matter in the amygdala. These changes are visible through functional magnetic resonance imaging after 6–8 weeks. Additionally, consistent practice can lead to physiological evidence of less reactivity to stress by the autonomic nervous system, which governs the fight or flight response, improved reactions in heart rate, respiratory amplitude and rate, and skin conductance.

In simple terms, regular mental fitness practices—such as noticing negative emotions and shifting to positive thoughts (and associated body postures) can become more natural over time. This process enhances stress regulation, decision-making, focus, and emotional balance, fostering a mindset oriented toward growth rather than fear.

Mental fitness training

Impact Coaching employs the Positive Intelligence (PQ) framework, integrating tailored accountability groups and understanding of application in a veterinary context, to help people build their mental fitness during a structured seven-week intensive facilitated programme and follow on support. The process begins with identifying internal factors impacting performance, relationships, and well-being. PQ training helps individuals to identify and overcome their 'Saboteurs'—the negative thoughts, inner critics, and automatic reactions that arise under stress. A Saboteur Assessment helps individuals understand their prevalent negative mental patterns. This is progressed to enable recognition of when these Saboteurs are in control and replace these reactions with a more balanced, positive mindset. A key technique, the PQ rep, involves brief, focused mindfulness exercises that interrupt the DMN–amygdala stress loop and create space for intentional responses. Later stages of the programme focus on cultivating 'sage powers'—empathy, creativity, clarity, calm, and focus—facilitating a more effective and positive mental response to challenges, aligned with TPN activation.

Veterinary profession success stories

These personal accounts provide powerful evidence of how mental fitness training has positively impacted veterinary professionals:

- Anna found that learning about the judge saboteur and utilising PQ techniques for managing disagreements and calming her emotions helped her improve workplace relationships, reduce feelings of annoyance, and maintain composure in stressful situations.
- Neroli learned to mentally ground herself for increased efficiency, become more aware of her body's stress responses for better emotional management, and found her enhanced empathy skill particularly helpful in her profession.
- Glenda found that the course provided her with a life-altering positive perspective shift that helped her cope with mental turmoil, particularly through using PQ reps to improve getting to sleep and fostered a sense of peace with herself and her future.
- Anthony learned practices helpful for gaining mental control and perspective, improving sleep, recognising the negative impact of overplayed strengths (Saboteurs), enhancing focus before surgery, and found he was able to generally clarify his thinking.

Summary

Our brains are wired for survival, this instinctual thinking can hinder performance and lead to lingering negative emotions which impact well-being. The unique challenges faced by veterinary professionals, including high mental load impacting career sustainability, specific burnout patterns, a stoic culture hindering the acknowledgement of struggles, and the difficulties of managing the human element alongside animal care, can be addressed by enhancing mental fitness which offers a proactive and evidence-based way to navigate these stressors and build psychological resilience.

We all make daily choices—about what we eat, how we move, how we interact, and how we respond to stress and others. Mental fitness enables us to consistently make better decisions, grounded in clarity, emotional regulation, and purpose. It helps transform automatic, reactive behaviours into deliberate, values-aligned responses. Over time, this shift empowers veterinary professionals to better handle pressure, maintain healthier relationships, and protect their sense of self and satisfaction in their work.

For the sake of your wellbeing and the long-term sustainability of the profession, investing in mental fitness is not optional—it's essential. Backed by neuroscience and applied psychological science, these tools offer more than coping mechanisms; they are pathways to rediscovering the passion that led you into veterinary care in the first place and sustaining it through even the toughest of challenges.

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