

# Calm in the chaos: tackling anxiety in veterinary professionals

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Disclaimer: I am not a medical professional. The views shared here are based on personal experience, knowledge, and research, and are not intended to replace advice from qualified medical professionals.

Mental wellbeing in the veterinary industry is a delicate balance. The emotional demands of patient care, the weight of decision-making, high workloads, poor work-life balance and navigating client and colleague relationships all contribute to an often-overwhelming environment. Among the mental health challenges faced, anxiety is particularly prevalent and, in my opinion, under recognised. While I can't fix or change the unique circumstances each of you face, what I can offer are some simple, practical strategies that—hopefully—help you begin to calm the chaos in your own way.

## Understanding anxiety

All emotions have a purpose. Anxiety alerts us to potential danger, mobilising us to act—whether to confront the threat or flee (fight or flight). It's a natural and adaptive response. As with animals who associate certain stimuli with pain or stress, humans too learn to anticipate discomfort. Sometimes, however, anxiety arises not from direct experience but from imagined scenarios. While occasional stress or anxiety can help us perform under pressure, chronic anxiety can have serious mental and physical consequences if left unmanaged.

Anxiety disorders are diverse and include generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and specific phobias (American Psychiatric Association 2025). Each presents unique challenges but shares a foundation of overwhelming worry and fear.

## The physiology and neuroscience of anxiety

Anxiety is not just a feeling—it's a full-body experience. Cognitive, somatic, emotional, and behavioural components work together to create the state we recognise as anxiety (Schoen and Holtzer 2017). As Healthline (2025) notes, this includes increased heart rate and blood pressure, muscle tension, inhibited digestion, and outward signs such as pale skin, trembling, and sweating. Emotionally, anxiety can bring dread or panic; physically, it can lead to nausea, dizziness, and fatigue; behaviourally, it often manifests in avoidance.

From a neurological standpoint, anxiety is rooted in the brain's limbic system, particularly the amygdala, which is responsible for processing emotions and detecting threats. When a perceived threat is identified, the amygdala activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, releasing stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline (LeWine 2024). This cascade prepares the body for a 'fight or flight' response. The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for rational thinking and decision-making, often becomes underactive or overridden during heightened anxiety states (LeWine 2024). This explains why someone experiencing anxiety may struggle to think clearly or logically even if the threat isn't real or imminent.

Anxiety's original evolutionary purpose was survival—it helped our ancestors stay alert to danger and respond quickly to life-threatening situations. In modern life, however, these same systems can become hyperactive in response to non-life-threatening triggers, such as work stress, social interactions, or perceived failure. Understanding this biological basis can help demystify anxiety and reduce the stigma around it.

## Recognising anxiety vs. stress

Anxiety and stress are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. While both involve the body's response to perceived challenges or threats, the key differences lie in their causes, duration, and impact. Anxiety is also commonly masked by secondary issues such as physical complaints like IBS or headaches (Healthline 2025).

- **Stress** is usually a response to an external trigger—such as an upcoming deadline, a challenging case, or conflict at work. It is often temporary and resolves once the situation is dealt with (Chu *et al.* 2024). Stress can be positive in small amounts, motivating us to meet goals or solve problems.
- **Anxiety**, on the other hand, persists even after the stressor is gone. It tends to be internal and future-focused, often involving excessive or irrational worry that can interfere with daily functioning (American Psychology Association. 2022). Anxiety is more likely to be ongoing, even when there is no immediate cause.

Chronic stress can however lead to anxiety, while chronic anxiety can also coexist with other mental health disorders such as depression, making diagnosis and management more complex. People with high-functioning anxiety often appear successful and calm but suffer greatly beneath the surface. They may overachieve as a coping strategy while struggling internally with constant self-doubt and racing thoughts.

## Impacts of anxiety specific to veterinary nurses

Veterinary nurses are particularly susceptible to anxiety due to the emotionally intense and high-pressure nature of their roles. Unlike many other professions, veterinary nursing requires constant shifts between empathy for patients, communication with distressed owners, and fast-paced clinical tasks. This emotional labour can be exhausting, especially when combined with the expectation to remain calm, competent, and compassionate in every interaction.

Anxiety in veterinary nurses may impact:

- **Patient care:** Anxiety can impair concentration, increase the risk of errors, and reduce overall confidence in clinical judgment.
- **Client interactions:** When under pressure, communication may become strained or reactive, especially with difficult or emotional clients.
- **Team dynamics:** Anxious team members may withdraw, avoid collaboration, or struggle to assert themselves, which can affect workflow and morale.
- **Professional confidence:** Persistent anxiety can erode self-esteem and contribute to imposter syndrome, making veterinary nurses question their abilities despite clear competence.
- **Job satisfaction and retention:** Unaddressed anxiety often leads to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, absenteeism, or even departure from the profession altogether.

Recognising these impacts is essential not only for the wellbeing of individual veterinary nurses but also for sustaining a functional and compassionate workplace. Proactive strategies, supportive environments, and open conversations about mental health can dramatically reduce the long-term consequences of anxiety in the profession.

## The role of a supportive work environment and communication

A positive and understanding workplace culture can play a critical role in reducing anxiety and preventing burnout. When veterinary professionals feel safe to express concerns, ask for help, or admit when they're struggling, it removes the stigma around mental health and opens the door for early intervention.

Supportive environments are created through:

- **Open communication channels:** Regular team check-ins, open-door policies with management, and the encouragement of honest dialogue foster psychological safety.
- **Constructive feedback culture:** Shifting from criticism to coaching can build confidence and reduce fear of failure.
- **Peer support systems:** Encouraging team members to look out for one another and normalising conversations around mental wellbeing can reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Recognising and valuing contributions:** Acknowledging effort and celebrating small wins can combat the

sense of inadequacy often felt by those with anxiety.

- **Workload management:** Ensuring fair caseload distribution, encouraging breaks, and allowing flexible scheduling, when possible, supports sustainable productivity.

Effective communication is key. Veterinary nurses often internalise stress and overextend themselves to avoid appearing weak or incapable. Encouraging clarity, empathy, and active listening in daily interactions can help mitigate misunderstandings and reduce emotional tension.

## Practical tools for managing anxiety

While anxiety can feel overwhelming, certain techniques can reframe and manage it:

- **Reframing anxiety as excitement:** Physiologically, excitement and anxiety look similar. You can use self-talk to reinterpret anxiety symptoms as anticipation. “I’m not anxious; I’m excited about this opportunity.”
- **The 15-minute rule:** For anxiety-inducing tasks, commit to just 15 minutes of focused work before switching tasks or taking a break. It helps combat procrastination and overwhelm while maintaining productivity.
- **Grounding techniques:** When anxiety builds, grounding can bring you back to the present.
- **Reprogramming negative self-talk:** Notice unhelpful thought patterns and challenge them. Examples include: All-or-nothing thinking, catastrophising, “Should” statements. Instead think about “Is this thought based on facts?” or “Would I say this to a friend?”. Replace with affirmations or statements like “Not now”.

## Self-care strategies

Lifestyle factors play a large role in managing anxiety:

- **Connection:** avoid isolation; reach out to peers or support groups.
- **Stress management:** prioritise tasks and set boundaries. Delegate or step back when needed.
- **Relaxation:** include activities like meditation, yoga, or art.
- **Exercise:** aim for 30 minutes of aerobic activity most days.
- **Sleep:** develop a calming bedtime routine and aim for 7–9 hours.
- **Substance awareness:** reduce caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine, all of which can amplify anxiety.

## Supporting others with anxiety

Creating a culture of support at work is crucial.

Do:

- Offer presence: “I’m here if you want to talk.”
- Listen more than you speak.
- Use open-ended questions: “How are you feeling?”
- Reassure and offer hope.

Don’t:

- Dismiss their experience (“Just relax.”)
- Push advice prematurely
- Encourage avoidance or unhealthy coping mechanisms
- Judge or shame

Anxiety is a common and treatable challenge among veterinary professionals, but it’s also deeply personal and can feel incredibly isolating. The emotional load, pressure, and unpredictability of veterinary practice often create a storm of stressors—and it’s in this storm that many of us try to function, sometimes silently. By recognising the science behind anxiety, understanding its signs, and adopting small, manageable strategies, we begin to calm the chaos.

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