Driving a positive team culture in veterinary practice

Positive workplace cultures are good for individuals, teams and businesses. Proactively managing the risks to a positive culture is essential to enable people to perform to their best ability. Workplace stress is one of the biggest challenges within the workplace, eroding positive cultures.

Proactively managing workplace stress has many reported benefits and can lead to a happier, healthier, more motivated workforce that makes fewer mistakes, has good retention rates and works better together (HSE, 2017). It's important for the wellbeing of individuals, drives positive cultures and it makes good business sense as it impacts the bottom line.

In veterinary practice, the management of workplace stress and wellbeing in the workplace is critical to ensuring the smooth running of the practice and performance of the team. Everyone is potentially at risk from work-related stress; it can affect anyone, at any level within any organisation. No profession or population is immune to it but we are all in a position to do something about it.

In 2017/2018, around 600,000 workers reported suffering from stress, depression or anxiety caused or made worse by work, accounting for over half (57%) of all working days lost to ill health (HSE, 2018a). Healthcare workers show high levels of stress compared to other occupations (HSE, 2018a), and those working within the veterinary profession will certainly not be buffered from these statistics.

There is a legal responsibility to create safe places of work and to risk-assess and minimise the risks of workplace stress. Workplace stress straddles several pieces of legislation (ACAS, 2004). Those of note are:
- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
- The Equality Act 2010
- The Management Standards 2004 (set of best practice standards not the law)

Further information on the legislation can be sought from the HSE website.

Rather than seeing colleague stress as another 'thing' to add to your to-do/worry list, it's important to know you aren't alone and at VDS Training we can help you move forward and minimise these risks to you and your team. We believe a proactive, preventative approach to your own health and wellbeing is as important as the proactive approach you apply to the health of the patients under your care.

Return on Investment

The return on investment for workplace mental health interventions is overwhelmingly positive (Monitor Deloitte, 2017). Circled in red on the diagram below are the interventions that VDS Training are skilled in supporting you to implement; starting with a stress risk assessment all the way through to a broad programme of support. The ROI figures shown below are taken from a systemic review of the available literature by Monitor Deloitte, and are considered to be a conservative estimate.

Figure 22. Summary of high confidence sources
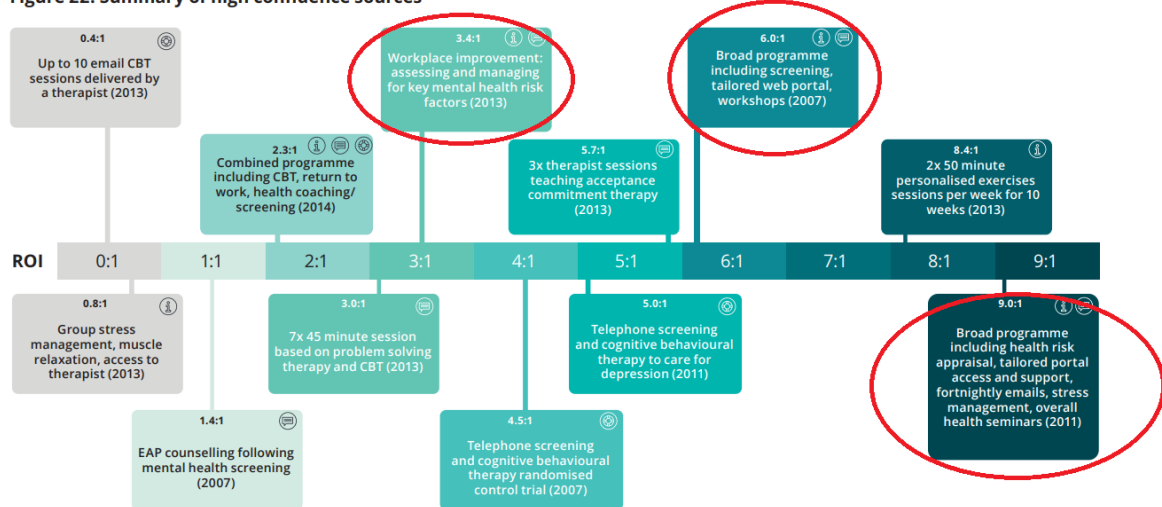
(Monitor Deloitte, 2017)

What is workplace stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines workplace stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them' (HSE, 2018a). It is the feeling of being out of control and unable to cope with the pressures and demands you face. Workplace stress affects everyone differently. What stresses one person may be a motivator for another, therefore it is essential not to make assumptions and presumptions but to identify the actual risks and challenges to those working within your team so you are aware and appropriate action can be taken to prevent issues arising and escalating. Workplace stress is not an illness but it can make you ill. Awareness is the key.

Historically, a more reactive approach has been taken with action only occurring as a direct response to a significant problem occurring in a practice. There are many reasons why this may have been the case such as:

- Ignorance – A manager is totally unaware of the potential problems.
- Managers may be worried that it will reflect badly on them or their practice.
- Managers may feel that it will just 'open a can of worms'.
- Managers are too busy to deal with it.
- Managers aren't sufficiently trained to approach and talk to employees about this subject.
- Managers may assume some common stressors are just 'how it is' and not understand there are things which can be done to manage these stressors effectively.
- Culture – Some people still see a highly stressful job as being a rite of passage in the profession and/or that the 'people today just aren't strong enough to cope'.

Forward thinking employers are understanding the value of individual wellbeing and introducing wellbeing strategies to reduce the deleterious effects of stress on their teams. It is often said that there are three cases which support investment in this area. These are:

1. **Business case:** How much is workplace stress costing you on an annual basis? Is this something you monitor? Do you measure productivity, performance, absence rates, cost of inefficiencies, mistakes, quality of care, complaints and accidents? There are many hidden as well as obvious costs caused by workplace stress. How much is workplace stress costing you and your team?

2. **Moral case:** Good work is good for us (Waddell and Burton, 2005). We spend so much time at work, the workplace is a great place to have a positive impact on our overall health and wellbeing. By working within and committing to a team, we all have a moral responsibility to create a safe environment to work within, so we can be the best version of ourselves, effectively working together for the benefit of ourselves, our colleagues, our practice, our clients and our patients.

3. **Legal case:** There is a clear legal requirement laid out in the Health and Safety at Work Act and The Management Regulations to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment and take reasonably practicable steps to address the risk identified in the risk assessment.

If we want to improve the wellbeing and performance of individuals and practices, driving positive workplace cultures, let's not wait for a problem to arise and escalate to a size that it needs tackling; let's instead work together to move towards proactively identifying, documenting and minimising the risks to prevent issues becoming a problem.

VDS Training recognises all of these barriers for busy clinicians and managers in practice and so provides a validated and very useable framework, facilitating collaboration between employers and employees to tackle the specific causes of work-related stress in a practice.

A collaborative approach

At VDS Training, we have created an online tool based on the validated HSE Management Standards indicator tool, WHO-5 and Utrecht 3 questionnaires. This is a comprehensive survey that highlights the risks and challenges each team is currently facing as well as drawing out the aspects that are working well for the team and the practice. The online survey can be distributed to all employees and helps act as a temperature gauge to identify areas to work on and enable a strategic approach to applied interventions to be taken. All team members could be working under conditions that cause undue pressure and be at risk from work-related stress (regardless of position, role and status). Recognising this and encouraging everyone within the team to take part in the survey is essential to produce meaningful results. The survey is online and anonymous so individual results are unable to be extracted from the data.

The survey includes the 35 questions that make up the HSE Management Standards (HSE, 2018b) ask about the six areas known to be causes of workplace stress:

- The **demands** people are under - workloads, work patterns and the work environment.
- How much **control** people have over the way in which they work.
- Their job **role** -– do people know their role and are steps taken so job roles aren't conflicting?
- The quality of **relationships** within the team.
- How **change** is managed and communicated at work.
- The degree of **support** available, both in terms of people, systems and resources available

The survey also includes a measure of individual wellbeing using the WHO-5 (WHO, 1998) along with a measure of organisation health using the UWES-3 scale (Schaufeli et al, 2017). The employee answers according to how they feel about these aspects of their work.

Validity of self-report and questionnaire-based surveys are often called into question because they are dependent on how people 'feel' about issues. Evidence suggests that individual perceptions play an important role in predicting stress-related ill health (HSE, 2018a). Therefore, gathering the opinions of employees provides a useful indicator of the health of your team and can form a useful part of an overall strategy to identify and address potential sources of work-related stress.

Other potential sources of information that can be used to paint a full picture are:
- Sickness absence data
- Productivity data – KPIs and past reviews and goals
- Staff turnover data
- Performance appraisals
- Team meetings
- Informal conversations with your team.

Once surveyed, it is essential to run focus groups with your team to discuss the outcomes and sense check the results. This is the perfect time to brainstorm causes of the risks and identify ways to actively minimise the risks. Remember this is not the responsibility of the managers to 'fix' and provide solutions to the problems but the opportunity for everyone to openly discuss the facts, brainstorm ideas and have a collaborative approach to solutions that everyone buys in to and can be held accountable for. This empowers employees and significantly increases the likelihood that sustainable behavioural change will be achieved, in contrast to decisions made unilaterally by management about what the solution should be.

In summary, applying this approach:
- Demonstrates good practice through a step by step risk assessment approach.
- Allows assessment of the current situation using surveys and other techniques.
- Promotes active discussion and working in partnership with your team to help establish practical improvements.
- Empowers individuals and teams to make positive change to their working environment

It helps simplify risk assessment for work related stress by:

- Identifying the main risk factors for work-related stress.
- Helping employers focus on the underlying causes and their prevention.
- Providing a yardstick by which practices can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

References

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Benefits of adopting a stress policy

Practices that implement a Stress Management Programme will:

Maximise

Team morale
Team loyalty
Productivity
Profitability
Engagement

Potentially reduce

Absenteeism
Presenteeism

As well as take active steps to:

Prevent serious illness/physical harm to individuals
Improve individual wellbeing through increased autonomy, mastery and personal development
Be known as a good and supportive practice to work in
Attract a better calibre of staff

Implementation of a Stress Management Programme can be used as a tool to improve communication, allow employees to air their views and enable them to feel listened to and that their concerns are being taken seriously. All of which improve employee engagement, motivation and in turn productivity and profitability.