



The leading
evidence-based resource
supporting better wellbeing
for veterinary professionals

COPING WITH STRESS AND BURNOUT AS A VETERINARIAN

Dr Nadine Hamilton BSc (Psych), PGDip. Psych

The best way to tackle the unique nature of veterinary stress that can lead to anxiety, depression and suicide is to use evidence-based research to create an intervention able to have a scientifically measurable positive impact on wellbeing. That's why psychologist Dr Nadine Hamilton wrote this book after spending over 15 years researching, working with thousands of stressed vets, and consulting with industry associations, practice managers and owners. This unique resource combines reading on mindfulness, positive psychology, wellbeing, and resiliency training with a 'toolkit' of practical tasks and tips to teach people how to cope with everyday pressures, so they no longer feel suicide is the only way out. Its approach has been tested with statistically significant results showing reduced stress, depression, anxiety, and negative affect.

Working in the veterinary profession can be a rewarding, challenging and demanding career, requiring a passion for animals, excellent interpersonal skills and a strong work ethic.

It also has a dark and very dangerous side.

The suicide rate for veterinarians as measured across Australia, the US, UK, New Zealand and Canada is

almost four times higher than the general population. This suicide risk has been shown to surface at graduation and remain for the rest of a vet's working life.

The profession faces a severe mental health issue.

The effects of working long hours, performing euthanasia on animals, emotional pressure, financial issues, unrealistic expectations, and dealing with



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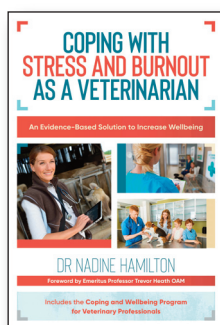
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distressed clients place considerable stress on both the vet themselves and their families at home. Failure to cope with such stress upsets mental wellbeing and can lead to serious emotional, physical, and behavioural issues.

Strategies across the globe such as awareness campaigns, crisis support, mentoring, and calls for changes to drug regulation are currently trying to encourage more vets to acknowledge the issue for themselves and their colleagues and to seek help. Both veterinary member groups and businesses are using approaches based on concepts such as compassion fatigue, resilience, financial distress and the clear need to care for oneself, in further efforts to reduce vet stress. Yet the 2020 Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study conducted in collaboration with the AVMA disturbingly showed no improvement in vet wellbeing since its first study in 2017.

Psychologist Dr Nadine Hamilton is passionate about veterinary suicide prevention, having been touched by the tragic effects of suicide within her own family. A chance encounter early in her psychology career led to her interest in the mental wellbeing of veterinary professionals. She has spent over 15 years in her specialty psychology practice working with thousands of stressed vets as well as consulting to industry associations, practice managers and owners to increase wellbeing, productivity, and retention in the workplace. In support of her aim to create a 'paradigm shift' within the veterinary industry, in 2018 she founded *Love Your Pet Love Your Vet*, a not-for-profit charity raising awareness about the issues within the veterinary industry and reducing stigma in veterinary professionals seeking help.

Her postgraduate research at the University of Southern Queensland focussed on how key evidence-based psychological strategies could be used to decrease the risk of psychological ill-health and suicide by vets due to their stress levels. What she found was that the best way to tackle the unique nature of veterinary stress was to combine certain psychoeducational elements. That meant specific education on the principles of **positive psychology**, **mindfulness**, and **ACT** along with a 'toolkit' of practical tasks from these fields. Combining these elements with supportive strategies such as stress management and communication tips results in a holistic intervention able to have a scientifically



measurable positive impact on wellbeing. She uses this approach in her popular *Coping and Wellbeing for Veterinary Professionals* workshop.

Building on this workshop, she produced *Coping with Stress and Burnout as a Veterinarian* as a cost-effective highly accessible way to empower vets in their everyday work lives to use psychological

knowledge and skills to combat stress, burnout, anxiety, depression and suicide. It is an easy read for individual vets both experienced and freshly minted and sits well with existing veterinary HR approaches as well as supporting face-to-face counselling and industry association mental health programs. It also provides a clear call-to-arms for veterinary industry leaders.

The book is structured in four sections. The first two provide vets with both an understanding and an acknowledgement of the uniqueness of their work and the mental health issues that come with that work. A section on psychology provides a comprehensive overview of several psychological fields that assist wellbeing. The final section includes specially selected strategies for everyday use. Together, these elements result in a unique resource able to provide self-help as well as support for existing vet wellbeing programs. Research has shown the importance of reinforcing the immediate-term effects of mental health interventions with take-home resources — something that reminds people of the information they have learnt and is able to be referred back to in difficult times. For some who take the book off a practice shelf it will simply be a confirmation that they or a colleague are not alone in experiencing stress and that their issues are understood, for others they will find practical tools helpful in their working day, for leaders it might help guide their interactions with staff, or it might help someone to seek professional help.

That's why the book is not only popular with individuals working in local vet practices, it has also been taken up by vet schools, large vet hospitals and across hundreds of practices managed by 'mega' practice groups. For these corporate businesses, the book is seen as a major cost-effective mental health investment for the benefit of their staff and a commitment to the global fight against workplace suicide.

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