

# Wellness: Not Just for Patients Anymore

Why Integrating Wellness into Your Culture Helps Everyone

by Jen Reeder

**Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT, is no stranger to the challenges** of the veterinary profession. Inspired by the passion of her parents—both veterinarians—she pursued a successful career as a critical care specialist. But while working as an assistant professor of emergency and critical care, she suffered from compassion fatigue.

“The cases were intensely difficult and the stakes were very high, and it took its toll,” she said. “I did not realize it at the time and mistook my feelings of helplessness and exhaustion as not being cut out for my job.”

Soon after leaving her position to work as a self-employed criticalist, Holowaychuk experienced burnout from trying to make ends meet. Then, in fall of 2014, she was in a severe car accident.

“While the car accident was not my fault, it was a wake-up call for me and a sign that I needed to slow down and make some serious changes in my life,” she said.

Now, Holowaychuk offers wellness retreats in the Canadian Rockies and workshops for veterinary care providers in North America to address topics like mental health, suicide, stress, compassion fatigue (and general fatigue), burnout, depression,



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—MICHAEL T. CAVANAUGH, DVM, DABVP (EMERITUS)

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self-care, mindfulness, sleep hygiene (tips to fall and stay asleep, such as limiting screen time before bedtime), setting boundaries, and preventing toxic work environments.

“We have lost too many amazing veterinary care providers—technicians and veterinarians—to suicide or other professions, and I’d like to see this trend slow or stop,” she said. “Amazingly compassionate people are attracted to veterinary medicine, but we need to do something to ensure that they can stay in this profession and not suffer its consequences. I urge veterinary hospitals to integrate wellness into their culture by openly discussing the difficulties we face in practice.”

She’s not alone. In fact, since conducting a survey on culture with the University of Denver, AAHA is focusing on cultivating wellness in veterinary practices with the publication of AAHA’s *Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*. AAHA will also continue to develop assessment tools and offer assistance with achieving a cultural transformation over the next couple of years.

“I believe leaders at all levels of the veterinary profession are morally obligated to prioritize addressing wellness issues,” said AAHA’s CEO Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus). “This may not immediately resonate with those of us who graduated from veterinary school in the 60s, 70s, and 80s and were taught to ‘pay our dues.’ Just because that’s the way we were treated doesn’t mean that is the way it should be. Many of today’s graduates are juggling major education debt



compared to the debt with which we were saddled ‘back in the day.’ Asking someone to ‘pay their dues’ while dealing with managing their debt and the rest of their complicated life is not a recipe for success or wellbeing.”

He emphasized that individuals must take charge of their own personal and professional wellbeing and satisfaction, and practice owners should encourage that accountability in employees. In his view, talking about such issues should be acceptable rather than taboo. By promoting a wellness culture, practices can attract and retain quality employees, and clients will have more positive experiences.

“We firmly believe that providing a healthy workplace culture can support the mental wellness of our colleagues,” Cavanaugh said. “I am very proud that the AAHA Board of Directors has made such a significant commitment to AAHA’s Healthy Workplace Culture Initiative.”

Cory Friedman, CBC, vice president of benefits consulting for AAHA Preferred Provider GCG Financial,

said his team works with hundreds of animal hospitals around the country to structure employee benefit programs, like health insurance. He sees practices increasingly beginning to offer employee-assistance programs (EAPs) as part of their benefits packages. EAPs typically offer phone support from a licensed clinician or mental health provider as well as face-to-face sessions and online resources.

“We absorb the cost because we think it’s really important,” Friedman said.

Employees who use EAPs can find support for workplace issues, like bullying and compassion fatigue, and for personal issues, like divorce and financial planning. Managers can be coached about issue resolution and dealing with troubled employees as well as be able to offer the phone



number of an approved counselor as a resource if a member of the team wants to discuss a problem. Yet Friedman said utilization rates for EAPs is remarkably low: just 2–3%.

“The practice has to do a really good job creating awareness of the existence of the program,” he advised. “But it’s also changing behavior and getting people to pick up the phone and engage with the program. . . . I think people are starting to recognize the important role that mental health plays in overall physical wellbeing.”

Kimberly Pope-Robinson, DVM, CCFP, author of *The Unspoken Life: Recognize Your Passion, Embrace Imperfection, and Stay Connected*, graduated from the the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine in 2000. She went on to become the medical director of a corporate veterinary company before managing veterinary specialists working for a pharmaceutical company. Many veterinary professionals asked her for help in coping with issues like stress and compassion fatigue.

As a perfectionist, she eventually fell into an “ocean of shame” for a variety of perceived failings: She couldn’t read every veterinary journal cover to cover, convince all clients to trust her judgment more than that of “Dr. Google,” or live off three hours of a sleep per night.

“Before you know it, it’s like, ‘I’m a bad veterinarian. I’m a bad human. I suck. Blah blah blah,’” she said. “You’re at the bottom of that ocean, and you have to make a decision of what you want to do.”

## AAHA Practices What It Preaches

AAHA is committed not only to promoting wellness in veterinary practice cultures but in its own office as well (see page 13). To that end, AAHA formed a Culture Committee comprised of staffers to create and maintain a more healthy and vibrant workplace at the Lakewood, Colorado, headquarters, according to AAHA’s CEO Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus).

“The Culture Committee is tasked with monitoring employee engagement and recommending opportunities to increase staff engagement and employee satisfaction,” he explained.

Three subcommittees contribute to this work: the Health and Wellness Committee, which promotes healthy activities, like wellness walks and yoga with Dr. Cavanaugh; the Fun Committee, which hosts networking events; and the Oz Award Committee, which recognizes employees who go above and beyond for AAHA members and coworkers.

“We also have a pet-friendly workplace, and that serves as a great reminder for why we do what we do,” Cavanaugh said. “Having so many AAHA staff involved makes this whole process very gratifying to watch. These efforts are making a palpable difference in our culture here at AAHA headquarters.”



Pope-Robinson urges people to recognize “sinking” that pull us down—such as clients without money, pets without options, euthanasia, or having to fire an employee—and “balloons” that help us rise.

Her initial decision was to commit suicide. She had the pills in her hand. Fortunately, at the critical moment, she thought of her rescued horse, Toby.

“I thought about how he wouldn’t see me again and wouldn’t understand it. Then, in that moment, my cat walked in, and I have that unique bond with him. Then I thought about

my husband, and I thought about my parents, and all these things. I realized there’s another path to go [down].”

In 2015, she founded 1 Life Connected Consulting to help other veterinary professionals find the path to wellness. She wrote her book—which is dedicated to the horse who saved her life—and offers coaching,

workshops, and retreats to spread the word that facing personal and professional challenges is normal.

“It’s not about just putting rosy glasses on and thinking all positive. You can’t do that because you do need to see the risks that are out there,” she said.

Pope-Robinson urges people to recognize “sinking” that pull us down—such as clients without money, pets without options, euthanasia, or having to fire an employee—and “balloons” that help us rise. Balloons are physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, and they are different for everyone. For instance, a spiritual balloon might be attending church or hiking in nature. Physical balloons could include running, yoga, kayaking, walking, or Pilates.

One of Pope-Robinson’s emotional balloons is a candle that smells like the flower lei she wore on her wedding day in Hawaii. After she euthanizes a pet—a potential sinker—she lights the candle and smells it for a few seconds to help stay balanced.

“I don’t tell people what to do. I help them visualize what actually fills their balloons for them and identify their sinking,” she said. “I’m the bridge that gives them the ability to verbalize this so they can say to their team, ‘I just had a major sinker. I need to go fill a balloon,’ and the team goes, ‘You know what? Go take five minutes.’”

Renee Humphries, the hospital administrator at Hillside Veterinary Clinic, a 24-hour emergency clinic based in Dallas, Texas, with six satellite locations, heard Pope-Robinson speak at a conference

and subsequently flew her to Dallas to give 30 presentations to everyone on staff. She made it mandatory for everyone on the team to attend one lecture and compensated employees for their time. She also ordered 30 copies of Pope-Robinson's book and loans them out on a confidential basis. She can't keep them on the shelves.

Now, the team uses terminology learned from Pope-Robinson to communicate. Many were impacted by her story of having a meltdown on a hectic day. For her last appointment that day, she needed to bandage a kitten's leg. All she needed was brown gauze, but the practice was out of brown gauze—and she just lost it.

"If somebody's getting close to losing it, they'll say, 'OK, I'm about to have a brown-gauze moment. And people will literally jump in and say, 'What can I do to help you? What's going on?' So it's really great because it's given us tools of communication to help us keep our balloons filled and keep [us] from having a brown-gauze moment," Humphries explained.

She said that's key with a team of more than 200 employees working around the clock on emergency cases and with the shortage of veterinarians in Texas leading to intense workloads.

She also encourages employees facing wellness issues to seek professional help, if need be. "One thing that I felt was a little overwhelming for me is that I can't be their counselor," she said. "And what I learned is I don't have to be. It's OK to reach out for help—and don't ignore it."

Crosby Roper, VMD, owner of AAHA-accredited Bay Park Veterinary Clinic in San Diego, California, has owned his practice since 1993. He learned not to bury his head in the sand after a two- to three-year period when his staff seemed to hate each other. He eventually let a half-dozen employees go within a two-week span and started being more careful when hiring staff.

Today, he has "really good employees," but he still worries when they start complaining during stressful times. So he asked Pope-Robinson to

meet with his 12 employees in 2017. Based on her suggestion, he hung a whiteboard in the staff lounge so employees can write down good things that happened during the day and thank each other for helping out.

For working hard, he rewards his team financially with bonuses and profitsharing, and he takes them out to lunch from time to time. He strives to keep the lines of communication open and cultivate a positive practice culture that supports wellness—something that benefits his employees as well as himself.

"If they're not happy coming to work, I don't like coming to work," Roper said. "I spend more time with these guys than I do with my wife, so they're sort of like family, really. I want everybody to enjoy work, I want them to have a good time, and I want to create an environment where that's possible." ✖



Award-winning freelance journalist Jen Reeder is the president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

## Links for More Information

- AAHA's *Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*: [aaha.org/culture](http://aaha.org/culture)
- *2016 State of the Industry*, AAHA's study conducted in conjunction with the University of Denver, which evaluated culture in veterinary practices: [aaha.org/stateoftheindustry](http://aaha.org/stateoftheindustry)
- Marie Holowaychuk's Critical Care Vet Consulting website: [criticalcarevet.ca](http://criticalcarevet.ca)
- Videos from Marie Holowaychuk's Veterinary Wellness Workshop and Retreat
  - [youtu.be/WktAGn0\\_nBg](https://youtu.be/WktAGn0_nBg)
  - [youtu.be/bUHtz\\_nHh4o](https://youtu.be/bUHtz_nHh4o)
- GCG Financial website: [gcgfinancial.com](http://gcgfinancial.com)
- Kimberly Pope-Robinson's 1 Life Connected Consulting website: [1lifec.com](http://1lifec.com)
- Hillside Veterinary Clinic website: [hillsidevetclinic.org](http://hillsidevetclinic.org)
- Bay Park Veterinary Clinic website: [bayparkpetclinic.com](http://bayparkpetclinic.com)