

Stress Management for Clinicians during the COVID-19 Pandemic



The WSAVA's Professional Wellness Group (PWG) works to improve the health and well-being of all veterinary professionals. For a profession already challenged by mental health issues, the COVID-19 pandemic is adding a further layer of uncertainty and stress. We hope these practical tips will help veterinary team members to protect their mental health and support their colleagues.



Stay in control

This is not 'business as usual' and you can't control everything. What you can control is your effort and your attitude. Try to ignore the external factors and, instead, focus your energy into where you can make a difference – safeguarding your business, protecting the physical and psychological health of your team and your patients and, of course, protecting your own physical and mental health. If you can do this, the problems will feel more manageable and you'll be more effective.



Offer social support

If you're a manager, talk to your colleagues and ask them how they are coping. They may be finding new working arrangements stressful – or perhaps they have difficulties at home, for instance, having to home-school their children or financial worries if they are working less. Reassure them and show support. Resist the temptation to give advice – it's often not about offering a solution. It is about listening and showing empathy.

We all need social support in difficult times – and this doesn't come only from colleagues, of course. Stay connected with family, friends, your wider social network and your companion animals because they all help us to cope with stress. Encourage your colleagues to do the same.



Keep your team together

Maintaining a sense of team when you're running with a skeleton staff or working remotely is difficult. Do your best to ensure everyone still feels part of the team. Small gestures – compliments, praise or other acts of kindness – mean so much and help to retain, even strengthen, team bonds. Try to build opportunities for contact, if not face to face, perhaps you could run an online quiz or other social event to bring colleagues together.



Stick to your routine

We all benefit from a familiar routine and a structure to our day and this becomes even more important if we are working in new ways, perhaps remotely or from home. Try to get up and eat at the same time. Set goals for the day or write a 'to do' list if you prefer. It will give you a sense of purpose and achievement and help you stay focused.



Keep a diary

Some people find it helpful to keep a diary. You can use it to write down things that are bothering you but also make a note of the three best things that happened each day. This will help you to maintain a positive outlook. It sounds a cliché, but focusing on the positive in any situation does make us feel better and more able to cope.



Build in time to relax

Whether it's a sport, a walk, cooking or a simple bath that helps you to relax, make sure you spend some time each day doing it. Even if it's just 15 minutes, you will be more productive and effective after it. Build it in to your plan for the day!



Get enough sleep

Take sleep hygiene seriously. Go to bed at the same time every day and try to relax first. Don't eat and drink heavily just before you go to bed because, while you may fall asleep quickly, the overall quality of your sleep may not be as good.



Beware of experts!

We all know the dangers of social media and the fact is that there is a huge amount of misinformation available online. It can add to the fear and uncertainty we're all living through. Don't watch the news all the time and don't believe everything you read or hear. If you're looking for advice, make sure you only trust expert sources – your regional veterinary associations, the WSAVA or governmental bodies.

For further information to help you deal with stress during the pandemic, we recommend these webinars:



Stress management during Difficult Times - A webinar from Dr Nienke Endenburg, Co-Chair of the WSAVA PWG



Coping with the Chaos of COVID-19 - A webinar from WSAVA PWG Member Dr Marie Holowaychuk