

## **Realigning Toward Resilience** *by Cheyenne J. Cannarozzo*

Veterinarians are at higher risk of suicide than the general population, with one in every six veterinarians having entertained suicidal thoughts; one in three veterinary students struggles with depression at a clinical level.<sup>1,4</sup> In the face of such sobering statistics, the question, then, becomes why. Part of the answer lies in the years before vet school. It has been posited that the incredible demands of the undergraduate program required for admission to veterinary school suppresses students' emotional development and their adoption of successful communication skills.<sup>5</sup> Further, the rigorous academic requirements and selection criteria used for admission result in highly intelligent cohorts, a group characteristic associated with predisposition to psychological problems.<sup>5-7</sup> This high level of intelligence has the added negative consequence of fostering an environment where students suffer from imposter syndrome; as a result, first year veterinary students suffer from the pitfalls of a life-long drive towards perfectionism: anxiety, comparison of self to peers, and a deep-seated fear of failure.<sup>7,8</sup>

Today, many of us are aware of these facts before entering veterinary school, in part due to our lived experience of them. It is one thing to know, however, and another thing altogether to bring this knowledge to bear on setting realistic expectations and standards for ourselves. I wish I had known prior to veterinary school that I should have been cultivating resilience—a skill not listed as an application requirement, but arguably one of the most important tools in a veterinarian's extensive toolbox.

Resilience is the ability to withstand adverse circumstances and maintain equilibrium; it is an active process of drawing on personal resources in order to successfully adapt to change and upheaval.<sup>9,10</sup> Numerous studies have shown that the development of resilience is the antidote to the perfectionism that so strongly correlates with the mental health issues plaguing our profession.<sup>9,10</sup> The capacity for resilience is predicated on developing various "personal protective resources" such as knowledge of purpose in one's vocation, support networks, self-compassion, work-life balance, reflection, social and emotional competence, and mindfulness.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, resilience is an active and learned process that is "developed and strengthened *over time* and through lived experience."<sup>9</sup> In light of this, it is crucial that an emphasis be placed on this skill not only during veterinary school, but prior to matriculation.

Veterinary schools should aim to always be transparent about the mental health crisis within the field, in order to counteract the profession-wide stigma associated with admitting to, and seeking help for, mental ill-health.<sup>11</sup> This includes readily advertising available resources to prospective students, such as student-run wellness initiatives, counseling services, and how teaching wellness features in the curriculum. Giving voice to these aspects of a veterinary program assures students that their well-being matters and reinforces resilience resources such as help-seeking, support networks, and work-life balance. The admissions process should also provide opportunities for prospective students to proactively develop personal resources within a given program. Students should be encouraged to reach out directly to faculty of interest, allowing them to forge connections they can look to once in school. Student-faculty meet-and-greets during interview days would foster social competence and expose future students to the professionals with whom they would work—and a familiar face can go a long way in a student's decision of whether or not to reach out for guidance.

To place further emphasis on resilience as a crucial skill, schools should offer opportunities for reflection within the application process. Changing the VMCAS personal statement to one asking students to flesh-out their sense of purpose within, and what draws them to, the profession—rather than continuing to emphasize experience and achievements—would underscore a commitment to resilience development and de-emphasize perfectionism. Introducing supplemental essay prompts that reflect core resilience tenets, such as "discuss a situation in which you showed self-compassion" or "describe an instance when seeking help was the key to your success," would allow students to frame their experiences in a positive context, and these essays would serve as tangible resources to later draw on for perspective in difficult times.

I learned about resilience in my first year of vet school at Cornell, where wellness has become a component of the core curriculum. This January saw the first offering of "The Healer's Art," an elective course aimed at helping students identify what draws them to the veterinary profession; such reflections promote a lifelong commitment to veterinary medicine and provide a means for maintaining personal and professional satisfaction. The interface of wellness and the curriculum has the added benefit of fostering a strong faculty-student support network within our community. Outside of courses, Cornell has an active student-run Wellness Initiative, which both co-sponsors extracurricular wellness programs to support work-life balance and serves as a liaison to the administration regarding student wellness needs. The college

also provides resources that students can access privately and on their own time: every student has a free subscription to “Calm,” a mindfulness and meditation application, and the library boasts a collection of wellness books for students to check out. These resources fit in well with the significant time demands of veterinary education and keep wellness and cultivation of resilience within reach, even on the busiest days.

As with every veterinary program, Cornell could offer more. Currently, our single, part-time counselor is unable to keep up with the demand for counseling services, and the college should employ a centralized, full-time staff of counselors specifically for DVM students. The core wellness curriculum does not begin until the second half of the first year; students would benefit from experiencing these programs earlier, when the demands of veterinary school can be most overwhelming. And while Cornell is actively working on transparency around mental health issues and resources, the veterinary community here, mirroring national trends,<sup>11</sup> does not yet display universal comfort with such open dialogue.

Resilience is a skill. As with any skill, it is best learned early and practiced often, not least because—much like antibiotics and surgery and thorough physical examination—it has the capacity to be one of our profession's life-saving tools.

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