

Achieving Happiness in Veterinary Medicine II

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Stress Almost Drove Me Out Of Vet Medicine

By Cherie T. Buisson, DVM

I just read yet another article on Compassion Fatigue passed along by yet another vet who has considered giving up the PROFESSION over job-related stress. While that might sound silly to some people, it's a very real indicator of how intense stress in our field can be.

I first considered that I might not be cut out for this profession while working my first job. It was a great job, but I'm a perfectionist. On-the-job training isn't something I felt comfortable with as a doctor. It happens to all of us – you can't possibly learn everything you need to learn in school. However, the thought of trial by fire with lives at stake started me on the road to chronic GERD and a whole lot of anxiety.

It turns out (SPOILER ALERT) that private practice wasn't for me. They don't teach us in school that some veterinarians aren't cut out for private practice. More importantly, they don't teach us that it's COMPLETELY OK to want something different. I felt inadequate. I felt like a failure. I kept at it. Surely, I could get the hang of this!

My second job was more my style. I'm a cat person (professionally speaking). Don't tell anyone, but I'm a bit afraid of aggressive dogs. Even little ones! I'd rather have a cat screaming and going for my face than a dog staring at me with "that look". I spent five years in cat practice and even considered buying the practice before I realized I wasn't at home. I left good friends and struck out for shelter medicine. Again, this was more my style. Politics, however, is NOT my style. I lasted 2.5 years before the Compassion Fatigue monster tried to swallow me up. I should have left after a year but like a true perfectionist, I couldn't bear the failure.

Opening my own practice was the answer. NOT my own private practice. I'm a relief veterinarian. I travel from practice to practice filling in for other vets. I work in cat practices, shelters and a hospice practice. I love what I do. If I'm not enjoying myself, I change gears. I added public speaking on hospice, euthanasia and compassion fatigue to my resume. I discovered that this was my passion. I'm now on the committee to create the hospice certification program for veterinarians. That would not have been on my list of "what will I be doing in 15 years" at graduation!

So, to all my brothers and sisters in the veterinary field – DO WHAT YOU LIKE. If what you're doing right now isn't making your life better, change it. There are endless possibilities for what a veterinarian can do. Some of those in my graduating class aren't working as veterinarians. That's ok. If leaving the field is best for you, then do it. I just want you to know that it may be that it only FEELS like you don't belong here because you haven't found your niche. New grads – it's gonna feel pretty lousy the first 3-5 years while you find your feet. You will never achieve perfection. Get that thought out of your head right now. Strive for excellence – do your best where it counts. It's fine to do just enough to get by on the little things. I know it hurts your little orderly perfect heart to do so, but get over it (says the woman trying desperately to stop putting two spaces after a period after nearly 40 years of double spacing). Make time to have fun. The whole point of going to school for all those years and borrowing ALL THAT MONEY was to enable yourself to live the life you wanted. Are you living that life?

For the most part, I am. I rarely work weekends or past 5pm. Read that again, please. I RARELY WORK WEEKENDS OR PAST 5PM. That is how I chose to run my practice. I do not put up with nasty people. If a clinic has staff or clients that I am required to be abused by, I leave. It's wonderful. There are options out there for you. Be creative. Go to conferences. Talk to people. If something makes you go "oh cool!" – investigate. The life you want is at your fingertips. Stop trying to change everyone and everything around you. Make changes in your behavior to create your desired outcome.

My health problems have improved greatly since I became my own boss. I take every holiday off. I go on vacation when I want (although that is a much more expensive proposition than it used to be – hugs to every boss who provided PTO for me). My inner control freak loves that no one is the boss of me. That may not be the solution for you, but if you look hard enough, you'll find yours.

Meditate, exercise, take care of yourself. Get enough sleep. If you can't, nap! Love yourself enough to do right by you, and you'll be happy and healthy enough to take care of the rest of the world.