

Wellness in a Pandemic

By Carrie Journey, DVM, DACVIM (Neuro), CCFP

If your practice is anything like mine, things are busier, clients are more stressed, and staffing is lower than usual. Veterinary medicine was already a tough job, and the pandemic, fires, and social unrest have made things harder for everyone. Recent polls in the Not One More Vet support groups found that 67 percent of veterinarians and 49 percent of our support staff members reported worse mental health and wellness than at the same time last year. We have been living in a state of emergency since March and it's exhausting.

With this pandemic far from over, how can we start to claw back some of our well-being? I would propose a four-part strategy: acceptance, unapologetic self-care, ruthless priorities, and boundaries.

Let's start with acceptance. It is okay to not be okay right now. It is rational and completely normal to feel stressed, anxious, and even occasionally terrified at what is happening right now. You might not be able to reach happy, or even satisfied every day. I would encourage to work towards (feeling) safe and supported. Happiness will come again, but we cannot force it. We can however be kind to ourselves and work to get in the right headspace to deal with our stress.

That is where self-care comes in. As a person going through a stressful time, the maintenance parts of self-care are critically important. Exercise, meditation, therapy, healthy eating, staying hydrated, and sleeping can help us deal with all of this stress better, yet they are the first things we cut when our schedule gets busy. I challenge you to give yourself one hour a day

to take care of yourself. Put it on your schedule and do not compromise on it. You deserve a single hour of your day, and if you make it a reality, it will better prepare you for whatever the day throws at you.

If you are having trouble finding that hour, ruthless priorities are in order. When you have too much to do, something has got to go. List everything you have going on right now and rank them in order of most to least important. The bottom item gets cut. Once you have more time, you can circle back around to it. Until then, it is not a priority. Check back after a week or two. Still running out of time? Cut another item. Repeat as necessary.

Let me assure you that the thing you cut will come knocking at your door asking for attention, which is why we have boundaries. Boundaries are what let us draw the lines we need to so we can pay attention to what is truly important to us. Fire that client, stop seeing new patients, and leave the clinic within 30 minutes of closing no matter what. Whatever your boundaries are, hold them tightly. We will have room to grow, expand, and give wiggle room again later. For now, we need to build up our walls to protect ourselves and our coworkers.

Years from now, we will look back on this and say "I survived 2020". We will have stories to tell our grandkids from this crazy time. As the saying goes: *The only way out is through*. Take care of yourselves and your team, prioritize what needs your attention, hold your boundaries tightly, and put one foot in front of the other until this is done. ■



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Dr. Journey graduated from the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine in 2005, and completed a neurology residency from the University of Pennsylvania in 2009. She is the owner/operator of Journey Veterinary Neurology in the San Francisco Bay Area. Dr. Journey became passionate about veterinary wellness and in 2014, joined Not One More Vet (NOMV) and is its board's vice president. She has completed suicide and crisis intervention training and has a Certified Compassion Fatigue Professional certificate.