

Wellness for Veterinary Professionals

Renew

This profession can be tremendously rewarding but it can also be incredibly taxing, both mentally and physically. This series—*Renew*—explores wellness for veterinary professionals from a variety of angles...physical, mental, and emotional. We hope these articles provide both insight and inspiration for a lifetime of wellness and renewal.

How to Get Unstuck: Help the Right Habits Stick

By Katie Berlin, DVM, NASM-CPT

As veterinarians, we're already high achievers. We checked all the boxes to get through school. We don't like to give less than our best. We're problem solvers. We help animals feel better, and if we can't, there better be a dang good reason.

It's no wonder we punish the heck out of ourselves when we can't seem to fix our own behavior.

I've said things like these, and I'm betting I'm not alone. "I was so bad this weekend. So much for my diet." "I joined the gym and haven't gone once. I suck."

Our culture teaches us to think in black and white where food and exercise are concerned. From TV to magazine covers to Instagram, we're told we're "good" if we behave one way and "bad" if we fall into other patterns.

I think this is hogwash.

Here are some facts about me:

I stay up too late for no reason.
I spend too much time on my phone.
I do most things at the last minute.

Here are some other facts about me:

I exercise at least 5 times a week.
I never get caught without nutritious meals and snacks.
I finish all my charts on the same day.

These are *not* my good and bad qualities. People see my finished charts, workout logs, and lunch bag full of

food and tell me they envy my discipline. But I'm the same person who stays up till midnight watching *The Office*, frantically pays bills on the 31st, and won't show anyone my screen time summary out of shame. If I'm so disciplined, why are those things also true?

Here's a secret: What looks like discipline or motivation ("good qualities") is often actually habit – just like mindless scrolling. And we develop a habit when we repeatedly do something, whether we mean to or not.

You CAN make healthful habits stick! Here are some tips:

Start REALLY small - and be specific.

Saying, "I'm going to work out every day" will probably end up in habit purgatory, because there's no support: Where? When? What if I'm tired? How much time do I need? Instead, try "I will do 10 squats every time I get back to my desk." Before you know it, you might go for 20.

Get yourself some accountability.

Especially when it comes to health and fitness, it's easy to feel sabotaged or judged by people who may not have the same goals ("Come on, have another cookie with me!") or when we fear ridicule ("SHE'S trying to lose weight?"). Having a person or group, even online, who not only supports your goals but WANTS you to check-in, can make a huge difference. Knowing someone isn't tired of hearing about your meal prep or wants to know how many times you did yoga this week can be the difference between sticking to a new habit or letting it go.

Forget about “good” and “bad” behavior.

You’re not a *better* person if you pack a nutritious lunch, and you’re not a *worse* person if you eat pizza from the lunch-and-learn instead. Shaming yourself into changing is not any more helpful than if you tried to change someone else’s behavior that way. It might work in the short term, but it won’t make you any friends. And don’t you want to be your own friend?

Habits that stick are about identity, not goals.

When I was telling myself, “I need to lose weight,” I never stuck to a workout routine. Partly it was because that wasn’t a good enough reason – it was too easy to give in when I was hungry or busy or felt the couch calling. But mostly it was because, in my mind, I was *A Lazy Person*, not *A Person Who Works Out Regularly*. Once I began to think of myself as someone who enjoyed exercise, that shift in identity led to a lot of other things that seemed impossible once: I became *A Person Who Runs Marathons*, *A Person Who Teaches Dance Fitness*, and *A Person Who Does Pull-Ups*.

Also, the strangest thing happened somewhere along that journey. When I realized my preconceived notions



about myself could be wrong, I gained confidence in my ability to change. I became *A Person Who Loves Public Speaking* and *A Person Who Knows How to Say No*, and my professional life changed completely for the better. I have no doubt I could also become *A Person Who Goes to Bed Early* – I just haven’t gotten there yet. (Plus, I really love *The Office*.)

The first barrier to any habit is how you see yourself. Once you realize you can choose to change your behavior, you might be amazed by who you really are. ■

This wellness series is proudly brought to you by a sponsorship from Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health.



Katie Berlin, DVM, NASM-CPT

Katie Berlin, DVM, NASM-CPT is an associate veterinarian in York, Pennsylvania and a veterinary officer at Clinician’s Brief. She is an optimist, podcast junkie, book nerd, and lover of all things running and fitness. She has a personal training certification and teaches group fitness. She recently launched *The Vet Reset Podcast* where she focuses on the intersection between physical and mental health and the importance of prioritizing both in our roles as veterinary professionals. You can also find her on the *Veterinary Super Friends Podcast* with Dr. Carrie Journey of *Not One More Vet*, and on Facebook and Instagram @thevetreset.

May is Mental Health Month and we would like to share tips from you—our readers—on how you cope with the stresses of your profession and life. We will share select tips in the May-June issue of the *California Veterinarian*. Please email your tips to Kristen Calderon at kcalderon@cvma.net by April 5, 2021.