

Renew

Wellness for Veterinary Professionals

This is the last article in the *Renew* series exploring physical, mental, and emotional health for veterinary professionals. We hope these articles have provided both insight and inspiration for your future wellness and renewal.

Dear Neuroticism: What Have You Done for Me Lately?

By Alex Miller, VMD

Have you ever marveled at how naturally athletic dogs are? They seem built for speed and agility, darting and dodging with aplomb. Whether it's a Border Collie wrangling livestock or a Yorkie stalking a mouse, it's plain to see that different breeds are suited to different tasks.

Some researchers suggest that human personality traits serve similar roles. Like physical traits, there are no inherently good or bad personalities, just those optimized for certain conditions and situations. The key lies in understanding our individual personalities and recognizing when they're serving us

well and when they may be leading us astray.

Despite phenomenal advancements in medical research and an ever-blurring boundary between neuroscience and psychology, the concept of the Big 5 personality traits has remained relatively static and substantiated for decades. Four of these traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness—are generally considered positive and desirable.

But the fifth, neuroticism (sometimes described as low emotional stability or negative emotionality), mars the others with negativity. Neuroticism is of particular interest for veterinarians, as we hold the distinction of ranking significantly higher in neuroticism than the general population. Do any of these descriptors characterize you, your vet school friends, or current/former coworkers?

1. High stress or anxiety when others are relaxed
2. Prone to anger, frustration, or excessive worry
3. Getting into bad moods and staying stuck there

These behavioral characteristics, along with the physical and mental repercussions of a personality high in neuroticism, help account for the epidemic of general unwellness facing our profession. Numerous studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between neuroticism, workplace satisfaction, and overall quality of life. In veterinary medicine specifically, a UK study found that, when it comes to predicting our overall stress levels, personality eclipses environmental factors. And what personality trait was the most significant predictor of occupational stress? You guessed it—neuroticism.

But it can't be all gloom and doom, right? After all, if the Big 5 are heritable, as research indicates, there must be some behavioral advantage conferred by neuroticism. Indeed, there are multiple proposed advantages to a personality



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characterized by higher-than-average neuroticism. These include:

1. Quicker response times and avoidance of dangerous situations
2. Higher competitiveness, leading to greater academic achievement
3. Creativity in problem solving

So now what? I’ve told you that our personalities are largely fixed, and that neuroticism has some serious downsides but also some evolutionary advantages. How does that help anything? What impact does this have on our everyday lives as we work through callbacks, hop from one allergic pet to another, and cram lunch into our stomachs like topping off the gas tank on a long road trip?

First, come to know and understand your personality. There are multiple online resources for this, such as openpsychometrics.org. Even a cursory awareness of our predominant traits can set us on the path to emotional awareness and improved relatedness with others.

Next, armed with this knowledge, start to take conscious note of your thoughts, feelings, and physiologic responses in a variety of settings. Are there any patterns, external circumstances, or settings that tend to lead to certain patterns of thinking or behaviors? Mindfulness apps, like Headspace or Calm, can be particularly helpful here.

To use an analogy, if we spend most of our lives on stage, playing out personal and professional situations like scenes, a mindful appreciation of ourselves helps plant us in the audience, affording us the ability to see our point of view as just one of several. Using this technique might allow us to reevaluate a pet owner’s scowl as not anger or disengagement, but possibly sadness or confusion. Our short-tempered coworker may be experiencing a personal hardship. And most significantly, perhaps we’re sending misinterpreted signals to others without even realizing. You see, since personality plays such a critical role in our response to situations and subsequent worldview, the key to

relating to others is understanding they may experience situations fundamentally differently.

Most importantly, fight the tendency to compare yourself to others. I could devote every waking moment to running for speed, but I’ll never even approach the level of Olympic athletes—not to mention your average toy breed. Yet I still took up running, and I’ve gotten faster over the years. Just as you’ve perfected your surgery skills or diagnostic capabilities over the years, so too can you recognize and appropriately leverage your personality traits.

In short, don’t be best in show. Be best in breed. Trying to be someone we’re not is a recipe for failure. But through knowing ourselves, with hard work and dedication, we can work towards being the best versions of ourselves. A path to a fulfilling career may very well depend on it. ■

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Dr. Alex Miller, the New England area veterinarian with Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health, believes that veterinary professionals are as deserving of health and fulfillment as their patients. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, worked at veterinary facilities in Barcelona, New Jersey, and Sonoma County, and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree. He lives in Massachusetts with his extraordinary wife, indefatigable daughter, and tiny adult cat.