Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress in Veterinary Medicine

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Professional Quality of Life
Secondary Traumatic Stress

Veterinary Practices
Veterinary Practitioners
Nervous System Regulation
Concepts
Secondary Traumatic Stress

exposure to the pain and suffering of others that overwhelms one’s capacity to cope
Examples of Exposure

Animal cruelty
Euthanasia (under conditions of moral distress)
Traumatic death (patients, people)
Clients’ reactions to loss
Escalated conflict
Discrimination and oppression
Susceptibility

- Prior history of trauma
- Social isolation
- Emotional suppression
- Blames others
- Ineffective training and supervision
- Lack of processing spaces
### Impacts: Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Emotional</strong></th>
<th><strong>Physical</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cognitive</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(dysregulation,</td>
<td>(somatization, sleep</td>
<td>(cognitive errors,</td>
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<tr>
<td>numbing)</td>
<td>disturbances, hypervigilance)</td>
<td>intrusive thoughts)</td>
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Impacts: Team

Organizational Performance

Performance Issues (absenteeism, presentism, task avoidance, loss of motivation)

Team Dynamics (conflict, uncooperativeness)
Veterinary Practices

Trauma Training
Critical Incident Debriefing
Regular Team Debriefing
Build Supervisory Capacity
VSW Integration
Debriefing

WHAT HAPPENED?
HOW WERE WE/OTHERS IMPACTED?
WHAT DID WE DO WELL?
WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY?
WHAT DID WE LEARN?
NOW WHAT?

Angie Arora, MSW, RSW, Veterinary Social Worker ©
What is your hospital currently doing to address secondary traumatic stress? What else could you be doing?
Veterinary Professionals

Professional Support
Peer Support
Social Support Network
Self-Care
We can’t think our way through stress, we need to feel our way through it
Opposite of Self-Regulation is Dysregulation

HYPERAROUSAL
Anxious, Angry, Out of Control, Overwhelmed
Your body wants to fight or run away. It’s not something you choose – these reactions just take over.

HYPOAROUSAL
Spacy, Zoned Out, Numb, Frozen
Your body wants to shut down. It’s not something you choose – these reactions just take over.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE
When you are in your Window of Tolerance, you feel like you can deal with whatever’s happening in your life. You might feel stress or pressure, but it doesn’t bother you too much. This is the ideal place to be.

When stress and trauma shrink your window of tolerance, it doesn’t take much to throw you off balance.

Working with a practitioner can help expand your window of tolerance so that you are more able to cope with challenges.
What factors shrink your window of tolerance?

What stressors take you out of your window of tolerance?

What does this feel like?
**Threat/Stressor**

**Nervous System Activation**

- **Fight**
- **Flight**
- **Freeze**
- **Fawn*”

* Maladaptive Response, not State of Activation
Dysregulation is not bad, it’s normal.

It’s our body’s way of trying to protect us from threats.

We need to understand it, embrace it and learn to work with it.
The goal of nervous system regulation isn’t to achieve a state of calm but rather to create a flexible and resilient window of tolerance.
A regulated nervous system doesn't look like:

This

OR

This

But

This

Always "calm"

Lots of highs and lots of lows

Regulation simply means having the capacity to move in and out of stress while still being able to return to "baseline" with ease.
Resourcing

Practice of inviting our body to safety and goodness (self-soothing)

Pendulation

Shifting between expansion and contraction of nervous system

Titration

Slowing things down to experience small chunks of discomfort so as not to retraumatize the body
Important Take Aways:

There are times we need to self-soothe, there are times we can increase our ability to sit with the discomfort.
Resourcing

1. Meet Your Basic Needs
2. Be in Your Body
3. Have Daily Practices
# Resourcing Tools

| Breathwork                  | Diaphragmatic Breathing  
|                            | Double Breathing        
|                            | Longer Exhale (4-7-8, 7-11)  
|                            | Five-Finger Breathing   |
| Grounding                  | 5-4-3-2-1               
|                            | Feet on ground          
|                            | Visualization           |
| Easeful Movement           | Muscle relaxation       
|                            | Stretch, Walk, Yoga, Dance |
| Nature                     | Mindful experiencing    |
| Self-Soothe                | Self-touch (hand over heart, hold your own hand, hug yourself)  
|                            | Hum, Sing               
|                            | Weighted blankets       |
The key is to integrate these practices when regulated, so your body can more easily tap into them when dysregulated.
Sit with Discomfort

Identify What Response You’re In

Tune Into Your Body

Discharge or Mobilize
1. Identify what response you’re in
2. Tune into your body

<table>
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<tr>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
<th>PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FIGHT</strong> (sympathetic branch)</td>
<td>Increased heart rate, irritability, dry mouth, flushing, muscle tension, sweating</td>
<td>Body prepares to defend itself. Explosive, condescending, demands perfection, controlling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLIGHT</strong> (sympathetic branch)</td>
<td>Body prepares to run away from the threat. Overthinking, overwhelmed, avoidance, worry, constantly busy, perfectionism, stuck in ‘on’ position.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FREEZE</strong> (parasympathetic branch)</td>
<td>Decreased heart rate, feeling numb or cold, physical stiffness, heaviness in limbs, restricted breathing, holding of breath</td>
<td>Body immobilizes when it can’t survive through fight or flight. Brain fog, difficulty listening, difficulty making decisions, zoning out, self-shaming, self-isolating.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FAWN</strong> (behavioural modification response)</td>
<td>Disconnecting from self to focus on others</td>
<td>Behavioural modification response to nervous system activation. People pleasing, no boundaries, ignoring one’s needs, loss of self, overlistening, overgiving</td>
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## Step 3: Discharge or Mobilize (complete stress response)

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<th>FIGHT</th>
<th>squats, scream into a pillow, clench fists and release, cry, laugh breathwork (exhale longer than inhale)</th>
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<tr>
<td>FLIGHT</td>
<td>fast forward Movement - run, walk shake to discharge panicky energy grounding – feet on ground, visualize energy leaving your body, 5-4-3-2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREEZE</td>
<td>conscious breathwork: e.g. Wim Hoff, Voo Breathing focus on one small thing you can do self-touch co-regulate</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAWN</td>
<td>increase awareness of our own emotional, physical needs boundaries, assertiveness griefwork</td>
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Over time, we want to build our capacity to self-sooth and sit with the sensations of each activated response.

Helpful Pendulation Exercise:
Irene Lyon, Msc

is a nervous system specialist and somatic neuroplasticity expert.

https://irenelyon.com/
What’s your golden nugget?
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