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Self-Awareness and the Veterinary-Client-Patient Relationship

Self-awareness refers to “the ability to see yourself clearly and objectively through reflection and introspection”¹. In a profession where many have turned to numbing as a form of avoidance, self-reflection offers us a way to more deeply understand and reconnect with ourselves.

IMPORTANCE OF SELF-REFLECTION

Many adults have learned the opposite of self-awareness, that is, self-suppression. This refers to pushing thoughts and emotions out of our conscious awareness in hopes that they will disappear. The combination of living in a society that promotes suppression through avoidance and practicing in a profession that is so busy, leaves little space for self-reflection. However, the ‘rebound effect’ coined by psychologist Daniel Wegner suggests that suppression leads to the subsequent increased return of the unwanted thought and associated emotions².

Engaging in self-reflection allows you to:

- Better understand and process your emotions.
- Understand how your behaviours are impacting others.
- Notice mindset patterns and behaviours that require shifting.
- Improve decision making with greater clarity.

SELF-AWARENESS AND THE VCPR

While the Veterinary-Client-Patient Relationship focuses on the sub-relationships and totality of relationship dynamics between all three parties, the veterinary professional has a responsibility to foster a relationship with *self* to improve relationships with others.

Not only does this improve one’s overall wellbeing, but it can also improve outcomes for both the patient and client. When a veterinary professional is more attuned to their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, they can:

- Be more grounded in how they communicate with their clients.
- Be more present when they are with their patients.
- Better handle conflict with colleagues and clients.

¹ <https://positivepsychology.com/self-awareness-matters-how-you-can-be-more-self-aware/#:~:text=Self%2Dawareness%20is%20the%20ability,objectively%20through%20reflection%20and%20introspection.>

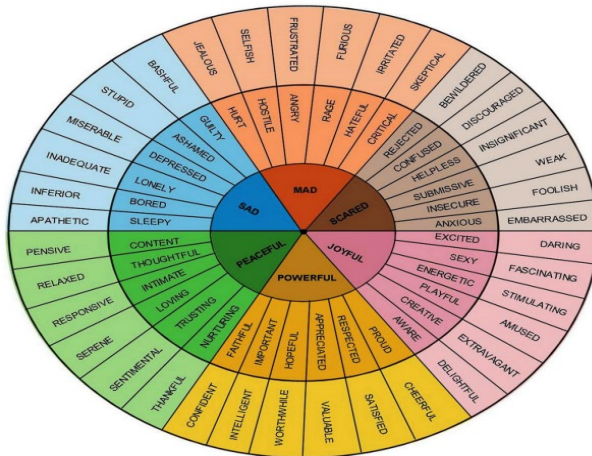
² <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/thoughts-suppression>

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

An important part of self-awareness is better understanding one's own emotions.

Some questions to consider:

- Do you know when you're experiencing emotions? If you struggle with this, turning to bodily sensations can be a helpful tool. For example, are you feeling butterflies in your stomach? A lump in your throat? Tightness in your chest? These can be helpful cues to emotions.
- Are you comfortable naming your emotions? Using an emotions wheel like the one below³ can be a useful way to expand your emotional vocabulary.



Source: Feeling Wheel from Wilcox, Gloria (1982). "The Feeling Wheel: A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy"

- Do you know how to feel and process your emotions? It's natural for someone who has learned to suppress emotions to sit with emotions. Working with a trained practitioner like a therapist can help to build this muscle.
- Do you have safe spaces to express your emotions? For some this includes trusted family members, friends, or colleagues. For others with more limited social support systems, expressing emotions with a therapist or coach can be helpful.

³ <https://allthefeez.app/feeling-wheel/#:~:text=The%20feeling%20wheel%20is%20composed,lighter%20shades%20than%20their%20counterparts>

TOOL TO DEEPEN SELF-AWARENESS

One framework to deepen self-awareness is by connecting to one's emotions and bodily sensations after a stressful experience.

Emotions	What am I feeling? Name the emotions.
Body	Where in my body do I feel it? What sensations am I feeling?
Needs	What do I need right now?
Awareness	Is there a pattern here? What can I learn from it?

By becoming more aware and accepting of felt sensations, it is easier to then understand what you need in each moment. Do you need to walk away and take five minutes to yourself in quiet? Do you need to go to the washroom and release by crying? Do you need to seek the support of a colleague to debrief?

As this process becomes more engrained, you are then better able to reflect on larger patterns of thinking and behaviours. Perhaps there are certain situations that trigger my body and emotions that I need to better understand. The more I can get curious about these patterns, the better positioned I am to begin to make aligned choices and changes.