

Establishing a resilient foundation: values, boundaries and self-compassion

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Introduction

Being resilient is like wearing a pair of quick dry shorts – they still get wet, but they're back to dry faster than a normal pair would be. Resilience can be defined as “a state of being that promotes wellness and decreases the impact of physical and psychological stress”;¹ and is a trait that can be grown and strengthened.^{2,3} Resilience can be experienced in response to stress, as well as on a day-to-day basis which support one's wellness. Determining one's core values, establishing boundaries, and embracing self-compassion are three pillars of a resilient foundation, and having a strong foundation is a crucial part of a preventative wellness plan.

Values

Core values are those which can be used to describe ourselves, and which we choose to embody. When we are living in concert with our core values, we are living with integrity and experience less conflict within ourselves, and with others, on a daily basis. Determining one's core values is the first step towards embodying them on a daily basis. There are many lists of core values one could search through.⁴⁻⁶ However, selecting those that are uniquely appropriate to you can be difficult, because social desirability and wishful thinking can obscure our true understanding of ourselves. However, it is critical to take the time to dig deep and to seek to understand what our unique set of values are, and how they manifest in our daily lives. This is often done best by considering how we describe ourselves, what events in our past have most impacted us, and then what is most important to us. In thinking of these things, themes and ideas will start to emerge, those themes and ideas then point to one's core values.

Unfortunately, determining one's core values does not always mean it is easy to embrace and live by them on a daily basis. This is because values may conflict with each other, such as responsibility and adventure; or one value may even conflict with itself, such as meeting responsibilities at home and work, because of the nature of our lives. When this type of conflict occurs, it is important to look at the whole picture of your life and core values to determine what action would result in the best, though imperfect, choice.

Boundaries

What are boundaries? One of the most common answers I hear relates to boundaries regarding personal space. This can be a helpful way to consider the many other boundaries that we have in our lives. We have boundaries pertaining to space, and how comfortable we are with others standing close to us. This boundary may change depending on the situation, depending on the person we are speaking to, depending on who we are with, and so on. It is healthy and normal for our boundaries to adjust to given situations. These are likely minor adjustments, and if they vary drastically, we need to be aware that they may be difficult for others to predict, and therefore we may need to communicate more plainly about what they are. We also have boundaries in terms of what we are willing to give to others – whether that be our time, money, or energy. Less tangibly, we also have boundaries with respect to what we are responsible for. It is important to recognize what we have control over and what we don't. We cannot take or accept responsibility for the actions or decisions of other people. This can be particularly hard for us in the veterinary profession. Lastly, and most importantly, we need to have boundaries around our sense of self. No one else can truly know what our values are, what our intentions are, who we really are. Knowing this and ensuring we have a firm boundary around our sense of

self makes us more resilient to the opinions and comments of others. Overall, boundaries are rules of engagement for how we interact with the world, both in terms of how we allow the world to impact us, and how we ask that the world interact with us.

We all have boundaries, however, the degree to which we are conscious of them likely varies. Often, we only recognize what our boundaries are in hindsight. Think of a time when you felt frustrated, angry or disappointed? There may well have been a boundary of yours that was crossed. Noticing these feelings, and understanding their source, is valuable because it can support better knowledge of your boundaries. Once there is an understanding of what one's boundaries are, then the work begins of asserting them with others and yourself.

Self-compassion

Compassion is a sensitivity to or awareness of the suffering of others and a desire to ameliorate it.^{7,8} Self-compassion is turning that awareness to ourselves and our own experiences. Self-compassion can feel like a third rail. There's a certain vulnerability that can make it repellant. However, it is now being touted as more important than self-esteem and self-worth, as self-compassion is not reliant on comparisons with other people and there is no risk of it encouraging selfish or self-aggrandizing imagery.⁹ Self-compassion is also not about letting oneself off the hook, and it has been shown that individuals who demonstrate self-compassion engage in healthier behaviours (i.e., exercise, healthy eating) and personal initiative, to name a few.^{9,10}

Self-compassion has three components – self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity.⁹ Self-kindness is best considered to be treating oneself as a good friend. Think about the last conversation you had with yourself after you had a mistake – would you have ever said the things you said to yourself to a friend? Self-kindness involves changing the way we treat ourselves, and adopting an attitude of support, warmth and acceptance.⁹ Mindfulness involves having an awareness of what is occurring (e.g., events, emotions, thoughts) in the present moment, while refraining from assessment or judgment of the experience. Mindfulness is a necessary component of self-compassion because we need to recognize when there are opportunities when practicing self-compassion would be of benefit.¹¹ Lastly, common humanity is the knowledge that everyone makes mistakes, that imperfection is something that all people have in common.¹¹ This knowledge can help debunk the isolation that can accompany a mistake or disappointment in one's performance or experiences.¹¹

Self-compassion is a gift to oneself and others; can't be gentle with others if we are not first gentle with ourselves.

Conclusion

When put together our values, boundaries and self-compassion can be used to shape how to choose to live our lives. Our values should help us determine our boundaries, and our boundaries can help preserve the time and energy needed to live our values. Then, as no one is perfect, self-compassion can be used to respond to ourselves when we are unable to uphold our values, when our values are in conflict with one another, or when our boundaries are crossed. Spending time exploring one's core values, determining one's boundaries, and extending ourselves compassion isn't always easy, but it is well worth it.

References

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