

Veterinary Wellness Bien-être vétérinaire

Emotional regulation in veterinary work: Do you know your comfort zone?

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As readers are undoubtedly well-aware, one of the significant challenges of working in the veterinary field is managing the intense emotions that can be elicited by various aspects of the job (1,2): the emotional highs of accurately diagnosing a rare illness or successfully performing a complex surgery, contrasted with the emotional lows of being unable to adequately treat an animal due to owners' financial constraints or having to euthanize a beloved animal companion. The ability to manage emotional ups and downs may be just as crucial to veterinarians' career longevity and well-being as the ability to effectively execute the technical dimensions of their work (3).

As management professors, we are interested in understanding how workers navigate the challenges posed by their unique work contexts. We had read about the extreme emotional demands of veterinary work, discussed them with acquaintances employed in the field, and experienced some of these challenges ourselves as pet owners. We set out to conduct in-depth research with veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and veterinary assistants, with a focus on the emotional dynamics of performing euthanasia. We suspected that the experiences of our participants would yield insights that could inform our understanding of intensely emotional work in general, and about strategies that might help veterinarians effectively manage the emotional landscape of their work. We are pleased to be able to share the results of this research, which will shortly be published in one of the top journals in our field, *Academy of Management Discoveries* (4).

We learned that veterinary workers' ability to engage in *emotional regulation* is critical to doing their jobs well, and may be necessary for them to enjoy long and rewarding careers. Emotional regulation involves shaping one's emotional experience by increasing experienced emotions (think of an athlete getting "psyched up" before a big game), decreasing emotions (taking deep breaths to stay calm in an anxiety-provoking situation), or maintaining them (striving to stay "in the moment" during an enjoyable event) (5). More specifically, through

our conversations with veterinary workers, we developed the concept of an *emotional comfort zone*, which is comprised of a worker's personal preferences for feeling and expressing emotion. Participants who were able to stay in their comfort zones while performing euthanasias appeared to benefit in a number of ways, including being able to execute required technical tasks effectively, avoid burnout, and enjoy a sense of authenticity from experiencing genuine emotion. We also identified common circumstances that tended to move workers outside of their comfort zones, as well as organizational practices that helped workers to transition into and remain within their comfort zones, thereby making it easier for them to deal with the intense emotions of their jobs.

Learning about emotional regulation in veterinary work

In our research, we used interviews to learn about how veterinary workers regulated their emotions during euthanasia, as well as what practices and events appeared to be more or less helpful when doing so. We studied 5 clinics in 3 Canadian cities. They were all urban clinics that ranged in size from 4 to over 50 employees and with most of their business involving companion animals. Three of the clinics were family practices, and 2 were specialty referral clinics. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour in length, with the average interview lasting 40 minutes. In total, we conducted 54 interviews, with 11 veterinarians, 20 veterinary technicians, and 23 veterinary assistants. Next, we share what we learned from these interviews, focusing on 3 themes: i) how workers were both proactive and reactive when regulating their emotions; ii) workers' "emotional comfort zones," and iii) how situational "facilitators" and "hindrances" could influence workers' ability to regulate their emotions. We include quotes from our interviewees to illustrate each theme.

Regulating emotions reactively and proactively

Workers were concerned that if they let themselves get too drawn into emotions they would find it extremely difficult to do their jobs, as well as put themselves at risk of burning out. As a result, many interviewees described regulating their emotions both reactively (i.e., when emotionally intense events were occurring) and proactively (i.e., prior to the events, sometimes even months beforehand). Reactive emotional regulation involved what we call "emotional distancing," in which workers strived to avoid feeling the full intensity of emotions during an emotional event, like euthanasia. Effective distancing practices

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included focusing on the technical process of the work and/or overall purpose of the task (such as easing an animal's suffering) to avoid focusing on the negative emotions involved. However, workers also balanced distancing with what we called "embracing" the emotions of their work. They wanted to feel genuine, in that they were reacting the way they felt a caring individual would, but sufficiently in command of their emotions to be a stable presence for clients and able to perform their tasks effectively. In short, workers strived to feel some genuine emotion, but not so much that it became difficult to do their jobs.

"You get those ones that are really upsetting and like you know, not becoming an emotional wreck but at the same time not feeling like you can't feel sad... you build a bond with them so it's like, it's okay, you tell yourself it's okay that I feel upset. It doesn't mean that we're doing something wrong that I'm upset, it's just sad."

We also learned that workers engaged in "proactive emotional regulation." For example, if they could see that an animal would likely soon need to be euthanized (even if the euthanasia itself would not take place for days, weeks, or even months) workers would try to build emotional barriers between themselves and ailing pets and their owners, in turn making it easier to cope with the eventual euthanasia.

"I prefer to know if it's at least a potential to be euthanasia on the table, I like to know ahead so I can mentally prepare myself for it and so that way I can not get too emotionally attached with them."

Emotional comfort zones

Although all workers wanted to strike a balance between distancing from and embracing emotion, there was variation in their personal preferences around emotional experiences. For example, when it came to dealing with the emotions of euthanasia, some workers said they were always comfortable hugging clients and shedding tears. In contrast, others preferred to be more distant, not being numb but also not feeling emotions too strongly. Interviewees described learning about their comfort zones over the course of their careers, changing from feeling like "...kind of a little deer in the headlights" in their early days to eventually being able to experience and express emotions in a way with which they were comfortable.

"I guess it's personality. I don't let the really stressful intense situations bring me up too high. Like I don't get really anxious, and I don't get really depressed about anything. I try to keep it fairly level."

To better understand the idea of an emotional comfort zone, imagine a swimming pool, where the depth of that pool represents the depth of potential emotion in a situation. Your comfort zone depends on how deeply you like to "swim" in those emotions. Some individuals prefer to "dive deep" into the emotions of a situation, while others prefer to be shallower. Also imagine variation in the "breadth" of that comfort zone. There are workers who are at ease experiencing a range of emotions (e.g., sadness, frustration, joy) at different depths, while

others seek specific emotions of a certain depth and are uneasy if unable to do so.

In addition to knowing their emotional comfort zones, many workers had developed a strong sense of whether it would be challenging to remain within their comfort zones on a given day. For instance, being tired might make it difficult for some workers to stay at their preferred emotional "depth." Participants were also aware of factors that could pull them out of their comfort zones and deeper into emotion, such as a certain type of animal or owner. This self-awareness appeared to be essential to their ability to cope effectively with emotionally challenging situations, even at times asking other workers to step in for them during a euthanasia when they knew they would struggle to stay in their comfort zone. As readers can likely imagine, a worker with a narrow comfort zone is more at risk of being pulled out of it on a regular basis than one with a broader comfort zone.

Situational facilitators and hindrances

We also learned that situational factors could make it easier or more difficult for workers to regulate their emotions effectively. First, we identified situational "facilitators" which helped workers to stay within their comfort zones. Routines were one example of a facilitator. By participating in the routinized tasks that precede euthanasia, such as preparing the invoice, booking a private room, and sourcing the needed drugs and equipment, workers were able to transition into their emotional comfort zones. Similarly, post-euthanasia routines such as cleaning rooms, disposing of remains, and preparing keepsakes such as paw prints provide workers time to recover. A second type of facilitator is what we termed isolators, designed to insulate the euthanasia from stimuli that can elicit unwanted emotions. For example, ensuring that euthanasias took place in quiet rooms, away from the hustle and bustle of other clinic activities, was essential for some workers. Choosing out-of-the-way rooms if possible, and providing visible signals for non-involved workers and clients that a euthanasia is underway (e.g., one clinic attached a butterfly to the door of any room where a euthanasia was in progress) appeared to be helpful practices for allowing workers to stay within their comfort zone.

"In a hospital of this size, because there's so many people running around...if we're doing a euthanasia within the hospital somewhere, we usually try and let people see that there's a euthanasia going on so that people aren't laughing and joking in the background or making loud noises and stuff. And so, here, at this hospital, we just put a little butterfly magnet on the wall, on the door, so that when people see it they're like, oh, euthanasia going on. I should keep it down in this area."

We also learned about "hindrances" which could take workers outside of their comfort zones, especially when those zones were relatively narrow. Hindrances fell into 2 categories: i) pulls, which led to emotions that were more intense than desired (e.g., grief instead of sadness), and ii) shocks, which led to emotions both of uncomfortable intensity and unwanted content (e.g., owner-directed anger). Pulls that we identified include euthanizing an animal with which a worker has had a longstanding

relationship, seeing owners who are particularly distraught over the death of their pet, or knowing that the loss of an animal will have a severely detrimental impact on an owner, such as an elderly person having to euthanize a service animal.

Turning to shocks, an unfortunate situation that could be very emotionally trying for workers was owners not staying to comfort their pets during euthanasia. Many participants, even when they could sympathize with the owners, described this situation as the most difficult one they encountered in their work. Other types of shocks included euthanasias going wrong, such as when an animal had an unexpectedly high tolerance for ethanol, necessitating a second injection, or owners attempting to change their minds about euthanizing after the drug has already been administered.

“The worst situations in the world here are the pets who come in to be euthanized and the owners don’t want to stay...the ones that just drop them off, those are the ones where we’ll literally cry in sadness for the patients because I’m like, you know what? This pet gave you everything for 10 years and they’re scared and they just want you to sit there and pet them and you can’t do that because it’s too hard for you? Like, no. ... those are the ones where you’re just, you’re mad and you can’t say it to them.”

What can veterinarians learn from our research?

There is no question that veterinary workers routinely encounter exceptional emotional challenges. We offer the following suggestions, drawn from our research, as potentially useful tactics for coping with the emotional demands of euthanasia.

Learn about your emotional comfort zone

Our most experienced participants were impressively self-aware, especially when it came to how they preferred to feel during euthanasia. Most importantly, they did not feel guilty about enacting their personal preferences; however, workers also noted that it had taken a long time to learn about those preferences. Newer veterinarians will therefore tend to be the most uncertain about their comfort zones. While there is value in accepting and embracing this learning experience, it may also be worth seeking outside help to speed up the process of self-discovery. The Western College of Veterinary Medicine is on the cutting edge of this critical aspect of veterinary training, providing a full-time on-site social worker with extensive experience and knowledge working with veterinarians. Taking the time to learn about your comfort zone early in your career may be immensely beneficial.

Some emotional detachment is essential

Although some veterinarians will prefer to be more detached than others, it is critical for all to learn how to regulate their emotions in ways that allow for some emotional detachment at work. This may feel wrong at first: after all, we are taught from an early age that a good person feels empathy towards others. However, as Dr. Trisha Dowling (6) has documented, learning to differentiate between a) feeling compassion towards others, and b) taking on the pain of others as our own, is important.

Techniques you can use include focusing on the tasks rather than the emotions of a situation, deliberately creating some emotional separation between yourself and your clients or their pets, or simply giving yourself a few minutes of alone time when you initially start to feel emotional discomfort. If you have already been pulled far outside of your comfort zone, it can also be helpful to have another worker step in for you when possible.

Implement facilitators

As we learned, there were some aspects of situations, called facilitators, that made it easier for workers to regulate their emotions effectively. If your clinic is not currently enacting facilitators, it may be beneficial to begin building them into your and your staff’s daily work. For example, although the seemingly mundane tasks of preparing for euthanasia are often performed by assistants or technicians, some veterinarians may benefit from engaging in these pre-euthanasia routines to give them time to transition into their emotional comfort zones. Further, taking small steps such as posting a magnet on a door or lighting a candle in the lobby while a euthanasia is taking place, may ease any worries about whether others outside of a room will keep their conversations quiet. We encourage clinics to share best practices: two of the facilitators we documented in our research had been initiated by workers who learned about them at previous clinics.

Concluding thoughts

It was our sense that the veterinarians who had enjoyed long and fulfilling careers knew their comfort zones and knew how to detach themselves emotionally. However, they also realized that sometimes bad things would happen in their work, and they would be pulled deeply into negative emotions. In such situations, there is incredible long-term value in practicing self-care. Whether that involves building time into your day to allow yourself to emotionally transition from a difficult euthanasia to a puppy examination, telling yourself that it’s OK to have someone else handle a euthanasia when you’ve already done 3 of them that day, or leaving work at work when you spend time with your own human and non-human loved ones, taking these steps can help you to deal effectively with the challenging emotions that are inherent in your job, and continue to appreciate the wonderful aspects of your profession.

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