

**MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Make sure your clinic encourages open discussion about compassion fatigue, depression, and suicide.

FROM THE FIELD

Supporting Emotional and Mental Health in the Veterinary Profession

Daniel Aja, DVM, Chief Medical Officer and Senior Vice President of Medical Operations, Banfield Pet Hospital

I can't remember a time when pets weren't a part of my life. Although my family didn't own any four-legged family members, I always loved animals and dreamed of having my very own dog. Today, I'm lucky to say that my world revolves around bettering the lives of pets, whether as Chief Medical Officer at Banfield Pet Hospital or at home with my three Cavalier King Charles spaniels: Bayley, Thyme, and Troy.

It is this same passion and unabashed love for pets that inspired me to become a veterinarian. It is also what can make being a veterinary professional so difficult. We all entered this field because we want to help pets and the people who love them, but our emotional investment in pets' health and wellbeing can take a significant toll on us emotionally.

As I experienced in my 20-plus years in private practice, owners trust us with the care of their beloved companions and we have the privilege of sharing in their joy when their pets are thriving. We also carry a great responsibility to share in their distress when a pet is unwell, and in their sadness when it is time to say goodbye to a member of their family.

When choosing this profession, we know to some extent that we will be part of the inevitable ups and

downs of every pet's life that comes through our doors, but it's time we start talking more openly about how the difficult aspects of our jobs can have serious negative consequences on our emotional wellbeing and mental health.

EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION: THEN AND NOW

For much of my career, mental health issues in the industry were rarely examined and the topic was largely seen as taboo in day-to-day discussions. We all vaguely knew the term "compassion fatigue" when describing the emotional strain we felt for not being able to help and fix every pet or problem that came our way, and we didn't yet have the appropriate language or tools to discuss the complexities of what we were experiencing emotionally. We were barely scratching the surface of a huge issue that continues to impact the profession to this day.

An area of particular concern for me is cyberbullying, in part due to the rise of social media and the ability to access people online. This phenomenon has drastically changed the environment in which veterinarians and veterinary professionals work and amplifies a lot of the stress and anxiety we were already feeling. A

study conducted in 2014 by the American Veterinary Medical Association found that 1 in 5 veterinarians has been a victim or works with someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying in the workplace,¹ and this issue still impacts veterinary professionals every day. The ability to air grievances and condemn veterinarians or practices online can make matters worse. Online posts often escalate, sometimes leading to veterinarians and paraprofessionals receiving widespread backlash, ranging from verbal abuse to serious threats of physical harm, for situations in which they may not have been responsible.

Veterinary professionals have been dealing with emotional and mental health issues for decades, so it might come as a surprise that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention first studied mental health in the veterinary profession in 2014.² The results of the study were jarring and found that veterinarians experience mental health issues at significantly higher rates than the general population. Further, it revealed 1 in 10 veterinarians has suffered severe psychological distress and more than 1 in 6 have considered suicide.

As a profession, we need to encourage each other to bring issues around cyberbullying, compassion fatigue, depression, and suicide into the public discussion—despite how uncomfortable, vulnerable, and foreign this can feel. When we discuss our experiences openly and honestly, we unlock the opportunity to support one another and help move the profession forward. We need to encourage each other to seek professional support when needed so we can learn ways to manage the difficulties that exist in our chosen profession.

THE SEVERE IMPACTS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE, CYBERBULLYING AND MORE

As veterinary professionals, we have incredibly important jobs that come with intense feelings of responsibility. These feelings can, over time, impact us mentally and physically and can lead to compassion fatigue, stress, depression, anxiety, exhaustion, or other health issues. If left unaddressed, these problems can become worse.

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We made significant investments in our education and career not for any sort of financial reward, but because we are dedicated to the emotional gratification of our work. When cyberbullying occurs or compassion fatigue sets in, we start to question our career choice and the value of being in the veterinary profession. If this happens to you, it is important to know that you're not alone and there are resources available, whether through the people you work with every day or organizations dedicated to addressing these impacts. At Banfield, we realize the importance of prioritizing the health and wellbeing of our associates, and among other things, we've created a Health & Wellbeing team at our headquarters—including an in-house mental health professional—that is dedicated to addressing these issues, while continuing to share key learnings with the profession at conferences throughout the year.

Each and every one of us in the veterinary profession can make a difference by having open conversations and seeking education and resources that better position us for long-term careers doing what we love most: providing incredible pet care. **TVP**



Daniel Aja

Dr. Aja is Banfield Pet Hospital's chief medical officer and senior vice president of veterinary medical operations. He leads Banfield's medical quality initiatives across more than 1,000 hospitals nationwide. A Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine graduate, Dr. Aja has more than 35 years of experience in veterinary medicine. Prior to joining Banfield in 2014, he was director of U.S. Professional and Veterinary Affairs at Hill's Pet Nutrition, and owned and operated Cherry Bend Animal Hospital, an AAHA-accredited veterinary practice in Traverse City, Michigan.

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