



**Jenny Moffett** qualified from the Rotal Veterinary College in 2000 and has a research interest in veterinary education and career trajectories. She is a senior tutor at the University of Surrey.



**Susan Matthew** lectures at the University of Sydney and has a PhD in veterinary education. She draws on her experience as a small animal vet and practice administrator in her teaching, while also researching students' and graduates' experiences.



**Anne Fawcett** qualified from the University of Sydney and obtained a Masters in small animal practice from Murdoch University. She currently works as a general practitioner and as lecturer at the University of Sydney. She blogs at [www.smallanimaltalk.com](http://www.smallanimaltalk.com)

# Building career resilience

Jenny Moffett, Susan Matthew, Anne Fawcett

**Vets can face a variety of career setbacks and workplace stressors which can profoundly affect their professional and personal lives. This article considers how vets can learn and implement coping skills that can protect against those stressors and foster resilience.**

## What do we mean by resilience?

Resilience is a term in psychological literature that initially referred to the human capacity to thrive after extremely adverse or traumatic events, such as the death of a close relation, or a violent or life-threatening situation (Bonanno 2004). It has since become something of a buzzword and is applied more broadly as the ability to maintain equilibrium in different adverse circumstances, including the workplace.

Resilience is not the same as recovery. Recovery implies a period of disruption to normal functioning for a period of time before the individual returns to normal function. Resilience implies the ability to maintain equilibrium through adversity. According to Collard and others (1996), resilience is 'the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive'. Jackson and others (2007) hold that resilience is 'the ability of an individual to adjust to adversity, maintain equilibrium, retain some sense of control over their environment, and continue to move on in a positive manner'. Resilience is active and dynamic; it is an ongoing process rather than a state one simply achieves, and allows an individual to cope with stressful transitions and manage life events.

The underlying processes and traits which comprise and contribute to resilience are less well defined. Different individuals may be resilient in different ways and one's resilience may vary across one's lifespan or career (Bonanno 2004).

## Career resilience

Career resilience, specifically, is the ability to maintain equilibrium in the face of workplace adversity. Workplace adversity can be viewed as any negative, stressful, challenging, difficult or even traumatic event or period of hardship that is encountered in the practice setting (Jackson and others 2007). It may also be applied to the need to cope with rejection in an increasingly competitive job market where competition for positions, particularly for new graduates, is extremely high (Grote and others 2012).

## Why is resilience important for vets?

While there are myriad rewards involved in veterinary work, it can also be stressful and stressors can have a cumulative effect. Individuals must cope with multiple

demands on their time and attention each day, together with the physical and emotional exhaustion of consistently caring for others. Busy consulting schedules with insufficient time per patient, challenging surgeries, demanding clients, competing priorities and unexpected events make workload management difficult (Smith and others 2009). This is exacerbated by the emotional challenges of euthanasia consultations, client complaints and financial restrictions on veterinary care.

Furthermore, some vets may not be comfortable or used to dealing with failure. The frequent need to implement treatment protocols with incomplete information about an animal's health creates clinical uncertainty, in contrast to the way in which students are often taught at veterinary school. According to Viner (2010), 'The admission process to veterinary school and the passage through the course requires repeated success, whereas clinical practice demands the ability to cope with failure – something that can come as a great shock to a young, academic high-flyer. Perhaps most importantly, the basic sciences and clinical training that we receive in veterinary referral centres deal in high levels of certainty, whereas in practice we have to develop the ability to make decisions where there is a high level of uncertainty about the correct path to be followed, and the data set is frequently frustratingly incomplete.' Graduates need to be skilled at accepting this uncertainty, managing the anxiety it generates and continuing to make progress (Cooke and others 2013).

Emotional resilience is also important in managing compassion fatigue in veterinary medicine. Compassion fatigue is exhaustion due to the emotional demands of caring for others (Figley and Roop 2006), and veterinarians are especially vulnerable due to their dual role in helping both animals and their owners in stressful situations. Clients' distress, sadness and anxiety about their animals can be 'catching', and is also felt personally by veterinarians seeking to provide high quality care. The ongoing demands of providing empathic care throughout a veterinary career can lead to burnout if the symptoms of compassion fatigue are not addressed early on.

In addition to these stressors associated with caring for animals, there are stressors associated with the management of veterinary care, including interpersonal conflict with co-workers, lack of clarity about individual responsibilities and unwelcome roster changes. Limited training in assertive communication and conflict management means that veterinarians are often poorly equipped for addressing these challenges effectively.

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There is some evidence that the veterinary employment market is becoming increasingly crowded, with the potential for increased competition for jobs (Baguley 2011, AVMA 2013, BEVA 2013, Baguley 2014). Some graduates face periods of unemployment, and must deal with repeated rejection without becoming discouraged. Those burdened by high levels of student debt experience additional pressure to find work quickly. For some, this means accepting work that conflicts with their values and ideals, increasing the stress that surrounds their new-found employment.

Veterinary surgeons, like everyone else, also experience a range of personal stressors throughout their career. These include caring for ageing parents and young children, taking on mortgages or business loans, or coming to terms with the death of close friends and family members among others. Some veterinarians may also develop work-related health conditions that mean the nature and focus of their employment needs to change, such as allergies to animals, zoonoses and injuries (Smith and others 2009). This can be a major setback for veterinarians whose goal throughout their career has been to work in a particular sector of the profession.

Vets need to develop the skills of balancing the requirements of their personal and professional lives in a

way that is congruent with their values, and to navigate the emotional challenges associated with adverse personal events. This can protect against negative outcomes like burnout, depression, addiction and suicide, increasing positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and career success (Lounsbury and others 2003).

## Building resilient professionals

The good news is that career resilience can be developed and strengthened through strategies aimed at reducing vulnerability to stressors and managing the impact of adversity in the workplace (Jackson and others 2007). A number of self development strategies, both mental and physical, have been proposed in the literature (Jackson and others 2007, Jensen and others 2008, Southwick and Charney 2012) which we outline below. Box 1 and 2 provide a number of practical tips for building resilience.

### Developing specific characteristics, attitudes and perspectives

People with resilient characteristics frequently exhibit a 'hardy' personality, which means that they tend to interpret stressful circumstances as relatively non-threatening. They are also more likely to believe that they have the inner resources to overcome difficult life events. Psychologists (Maddi and Kobasa 1984) have used the 'three Cs' to describe this personality of hardy individuals:

- **Challenge** – see life as a series of challenges, both positive and negative, that can be learned from;
- **Commitment** – have a personal commitment to self and finding meaning in what they do;
- **Control** – perceive that they have a healthy level of personal control over their life and work.

Through genetic and environmental factors, some people have more of a natural tendency towards hardiness than others. However, it is possible for most people to raise their own innate level of hardiness by adopting a more flexible perspective on life's challenges. A hardy approach involves reflecting on your circumstances, diagnosing what can be done to resolve any difficulties faced (or view these differently), and implementing any necessary steps for change. Sustained practice of such an approach can increase a person's sense of control over their life and career.

## Box 1: Self-help tips for building the resilient professional

### Developing specific characteristics, attitudes and perspectives

- Identify and accept personal limitations, allowing for development of realistic expectations and self-forgiveness (Jensen and others 2008).
- Accept and manage the uncertainty of clinical practice by discussing tolerance of uncertainty and evidence-based management of clinical uncertainty with colleagues (Cooke and others 2013).
- Take an optimistic perspective that views obstacles as surmountable and recognise conflict as an opportunity (Rowe and Kidd 2009).

### Attending to self-care

- Make home a sanctuary (Rowe and Kidd 2009).
- Set boundaries around working hours.
- Prioritise sleep and healthy eating, make regular visits to your general practitioner, and exercise in your free time (Rowe and Kidd 2009).

### Developing insight and maintaining positivity

- Reflect on disappointments with friends and colleagues; they may lend a different perspective and discussion can be the basis of forming a plan to move forward (Grote and others 2012).
- Identify your core values and develop a plan by which these are supported in your working life (Jensen and others 2008).
- Reflect on your situation and identify one thing you can do differently to improve things – then do it.
- Practice mindfulness or relaxation techniques daily.

### Creating and maintaining a supportive social network

- Invest in strong relationships, especially family and friends (Rowe and Kidd 2009).
- Develop a network of supportive colleagues and friends outside of the immediate work area with whom to debrief (Jackson and others 2007).
- Establish mentors whom you can ask for advice.



Exercise in your spare time contributes to self-care

## Box 2: Resilience tips for job-seeking new graduates

- Anticipate periods of unemployment but develop job hunting skills, such as building a CV and consulting a careers adviser;
- Establish a mentoring relationship with a respected colleague with whom to discuss applications, as well as potential opportunities and any rejections;
- Take the opportunity to enhance your CV – volunteering will increase your experience and may also lead to career opportunities. Further education courses may 'value-add', and there is less need to explain a gap in your employment record;
- Network – colleagues and lecturers may know of potential employment opportunities or may be looking for a research assistant on a short-term basis.
- Don't give up!



While rewarding, caring for young children is also a potential stressor for many veterinarians



Work-related injuries can require a change in duties. In this case, the vet was not able to work for several months due to infection

### Attending to self-care

In one study on resilience in human doctors (Jensen and others 2008), a participant commented on self-care: 'It's the advice they give you on the airplane – if you're travelling with a child, [in an emergency] put your own [oxygen] mask on first and then put the child's on. Working in here, you have to look after yourself or you can't look after your patients.' The ability to self-care and take time out for oneself is a constant challenge faced by veterinary workers. Resilient individuals are more likely to take care of their health through adequate sleep and exercise, good nutrition, defined 'time off' from work and attention to spiritual beliefs.

The benefits of such commonsense activities are not simply confined to the physical (for example, regular, aerobic exercise has been shown to help increase cognitive skills such as concentration, memory and decision-making, which can help a person to be more effective in how they use their time). Research also suggests that resilient individuals are more likely to set personal and professional goals and devise ways of meeting these goals. Practical examples of this in the workplace include learning to say 'no' to projects that will overstretch your personal resources and finding ways to protect time for continuing professional development.

### Developing insight and staying positive

Another successful strategy adopted by resilient individuals is a greater understanding of one's own needs and values, and how these relate to emotional responses throughout the working day. The ability to manage strong feelings and impulses is a key coping skill when undertaking challenging work. Also, it is thought that the ability to find humour and joy in everyday situations can act as a protective factor and, to some extent, 'inoculate' people against the stress of difficult situations.

A useful way of tuning in to your emotions and the mind-body relationship is mindfulness meditation. Mindful practice involves taking the time to create a conscious awareness of something specific (eg, body sensations or breathing). This promotes a number of physiological changes and a change in mind-set, which offers practitioners a greater capacity for dealing with stressful situations. Mindfulness meditation workshops are a good starting point for those who are unfamiliar with the activity.

### Supportive social networks

The importance of support from one's peers, partners, families and friends in resilience is a recurring theme in the literature. A resilient person rarely exists in isolation; he or she normally has a network of positive personal and professional relationships that acts as a 'safety net' when stressful circumstances occur. Support can be personal or work-related; it can also be tangible (eg, financial assistance, help with childcare) or intangible (eg, listening, offering guidance). Strengthening existing relationships and developing new ones are proven ways of boosting your resilience to workplace stress.

Some practical ways of doing this are to join organisations where people have similar interests and values to your own, to volunteer for a charity, or take up a new sport or hobby. In addition, it's useful to carry out an audit of your current social network. Ask yourself: 'Who understands me best? To whom do I turn for advice?', then work out ways of spending more time with people who are supportive, positive and reliable.

### How can we be supportive in practice?

In practice we can help each other to become more resilient to the challenge of the work that we do. Simple, practical steps that we can take include:

- Devise ways of giving employees more autonomy over their schedules and work hours – not having some degree of control in this area has been shown to be an important predictor of poor work-life balance and burnout.
- Hold regular practice meetings that allow for interaction and discussion. Such working groups allow employees to acknowledge issues, discuss challenges and share solutions. Team meetings can be used to facilitate peer learning when it is difficult to find time for continuing education. They also provide a forum for social connection and professional support.
- Encourage new veterinary graduates to take ownership of their career progression by supporting them in setting goals and building peer networks, for example through the BVA Young Vet Network ([www.bva.co.uk/young\\_vet\\_network/Young\\_Vet\\_Network.aspx](http://www.bva.co.uk/young_vet_network/Young_Vet_Network.aspx)).
- Allow new employees to meet challenges incrementally. Social science research shows that people respond best to stress and build confidence

Mentoring new graduates, especially around the emotionally challenging aspects of veterinary work, such as helping clients cope with the loss of a much loved pet, is important



when they are challenged but not overwhelmed. It can be difficult to protect new employees from the workload of a busy veterinary practice but, considering the time and money invested into staff recruitment, it makes financial sense to find ways to support staff and prevent turnover.

- Develop a culture of support by allowing team members to 'debrief' after stressful work situations and events, while also giving listeners the permission to say 'no' if they don't feel they have the emotional reserves to support others at that time.
- Mentor new graduates in managing the emotionally challenging aspects of veterinary work, such as clinical uncertainty, client complaints and compassion fatigue. Consider using external consultant to run workshops on mindfulness and assertive communication skills, as well as conflict resolution.
- Educate new veterinarians about the path to emotional resilience in practice. New graduates start with boundless enthusiasm but can be tempted to give up when they realise that this is not enough to carry them through a career. Encourage them to find their own rhythm of work that is consistent with their personality, values and priorities (Figley and Roop 2006).

## Summary

Vets can learn which factors contribute to building career resilience and protect against the negative impacts of career setbacks and workplace stressors. Key elements include developing specific attitudes and perspectives towards work, attention to self-care, developing personal insight and maintaining positivity, and creating and maintaining supportive networks.

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