

Living a Healthy Life; 4 tips for veterinary professionals



One secret to a long career in veterinary medicine is to make healthy choices throughout the day. Unfortunately, many in the industry end up on the path towards burn-out, empathic stress or even leaving the profession.

However, it doesn't have to be that way. Steps can be taken to minimize the chance of negative outcomes. Some examples include recognizing the importance of a lunch break, establishing effective time management, developing exercise habits and defining healthy boundaries.

The following are four tips to start you on the road towards a healthy and happy life style. Remember, it takes time to create a new habit. Be loving with yourself. Allow for a new habit to become second nature by taking small steps, celebrating successes and acknowledging the time it takes. You are worth it!

Tip 1: Lunch breaks

While attending a colleague's presentation on decision fatigue (yes, another Fatigue!), I learned about a study that tracked decisions made by judges. They discovered that judges sent more people to jail prior to a meal or snack break. Isn't that interesting?! It seems apparent that individuals make decisions dependent up on their intake of food throughout the day.¹

Veterinary team members tell me, "I don't get a lunch." My questions in response, "Do you not feel it is crucial to your daily performance and well-being or are you acting as a martyr, in some fashion?"

Regardless of the answer, timely snacks, eating a healthy lunch and drinking water are essential to a productive, happier day. In fact, "hangry" is now an official word in the English dictionary.

The point is that your manager and the Department of Labor know a lunch break is a good thing. It is up to you to fully embrace the opportunity to feed your body and soul.

Benefits of taking a lunch break

1. **Nourish your body** with appropriate food choices. Even if you run errands over your lunch hour, don't skip on eating.
2. **Nourish your mind.** Simply stepping away and disconnecting for 15-20 minutes improves concentration and energy levels.

When you make a conscious choice to make this time for yourself, you are far better prepared to take on the appointments and duties ahead of you in the afternoon. This is even more imperative during a crazy, heavily scheduled day. By allowing your body and mind to rejuvenate, you will be more effective and make better decisions. You deserve it, your co-workers, patients and clients deserve it as well!

Tip 2: Time management and prioritizing

"Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it." Ralph Waldo Emerson

Wow, powerful. Focus on the hour (or moment) in which you are in and make the most of that precious time. You may continually ask yourself, "Am I currently utilizing this moment to its fullest potential and best energy?" When the answer is "No," then you know it is time to refocus and redirect. If the answer is truly "Yes," keep on keeping on!

Prioritizing

1. In the morning (or beginning of a shift) and maybe after the lunch break, communicate with the veterinary team. Consider a "team huddle" where in 5-7 minutes you recap what has happened and explain what is going to happen in the next few hours. Highlight tough cases, tough clients, difficult recoveries, discharge instructions and patients that are ready to go home.
2. Categorize incoming appointments as in-patient or out-patient services will help in time management. Then look to find ways to streamline each type.
 - a. For out-patient appointments (exam room appointments), consider devising client educational materials, pre-loaded invoices and record keeping options.

- b. For in-patient appointments, discover ways to streamline admitting the patient for laboratory tests, minor or major surgeries or other common situations.
3. When was the last time you really considered how efficient you are in the tasks you perform frequently? For the next week, you are challenged to be conscious of your actions, asking yourself, “Is this the best use of my time, or the most efficient way to perform this task?” Chances are, you can streamline and decrease the time it takes to complete a job by just being aware.



Tip 3: Physical exercise

“You have got to be kidding me?! When can I find the time for physical exercise?!”

Michelle Segar has made a study of the science of motivation with exercise. Her simple advice makes sense. “Take any and every opportunity to move, in any way possible, at whatever speed you like, for any amount of time. Do what makes you feel good; stop doing what makes you feel bad.”

That’s exercise advice I can commit to! Exercising comes in all shapes and sizes. Examples include:

- Dancing in your kitchen to your favorite song
- Gardening and/or Swimming
- Walking and/or Hiking
- Sledding (walking back up the hill) and/or skating
- Bowling with friends
- Playing ball with your kids in the backyard or on a fun league
- Stretching
- Parking in the farthest parking spot from the store
- Taking the stairs
- Walk your dog, rain or shine!
- What else can you do?

Consider your lunch break as a viable exercise option and find a way to leave the hospital. Use part of the time to eat and part to do an activity.

The point is, consciously exercise. Make a point to MOVE your body for any length of time doing what you enjoy and be grateful it is exercise.

Tip 4: Set healthy personal and professional boundaries

Establishing boundaries is knowing when to say “Yes” and when to gracefully say “No.” You can still work hard and be a valued member of the veterinary team when you set boundaries.

In Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he encourages you to “Put First Things First.” He suggests establishing top priorities and bringing those to fruition, thus allowing the least important things to simply fade away.

Within a work environment, establishing boundaries can be done in multiple ways. When defining job duties, be realistic about the time and energy needed to complete each task with a certain quality or standard. Maintain the standards but avoid overtaxing yourself by setting unrealistic expectations.

It’s just as important to set and maintain boundaries in your personal life. In doing this, you may need to decline to help someone if you just don’t have any “juice” left.

You’ve got THIS!

Be aware of your health and improve it by taking a lunch break, manage your time, understand that exercise comes in all shapes and sizes (just MOVE!) and establish personal and professional boundaries.

Resources

1. Extraneous factors in judicial decisions, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, April 2011, <http://www.pnas.org/content/108/17/6889>
2. The truth about exercise; Your current motivation is based upon your past, Spiral Coaching, <http://www.gpspiralcoaching.com/the-truth-about-exercise/>