Mental health matters

If you’re thinking, “My team is fine! No problems here!” let’s look at the statistics. According to a 2015 national mental health survey, nearly one in 10 U.S. veterinarians might experience serious psychological distress. So odds are, someone on your team is either experiencing psychological distress now or will in the future.

And while it might be tempting to dismiss feelings of stress, fatigue, alienation, dissatisfaction, negative self-esteem and numbness as just another bad day, these feelings can be signs of a serious problem, like burnout or compassion fatigue. Ignoring them can cause significant harm to the individual and even his or her colleagues and patients.

Give your team the skills and tools they need to make mental health a priority.

PART 1: Team knowledge
Start by stating your goal for the meeting—namely, to better understand and recognize psychological distress (especially when it takes the form of burnout or compassion fatigue) and to discuss healthy tools and actions for coping. Provide your team with definitions of burnout, compassion fatigue and depression to orient them to the topic.

**Burnout:** Burnout results from stresses in the work environment, such as problems with coworkers or superiors. Burnout has three primary characteristics: emotional exhaustion, alienation from job-related activities and reduced performance.

**Compassion fatigue:** Compassion fatigue is an emotional and physical burden created by the trauma of helping others in distress, which leads to a reduced capacity for empathy toward suffering in the future. Burnout springs from where you work, and compassion fatigue is associated with the work you do.

**Depression:** Compassion fatigue and burnout are not forms of depression, but they can lead to and coexist with it. Some characteristics of major depression, as listed by the Mayo Clinic, include: feelings of sadness/emptiness, angry outbursts (even over small matters), loss of interest in normal activities, sleep disturbances (sleeping too much or too little), fixating on past failures and frequent thoughts of death or suicide.

Let your team know that their mental health is important to you, and make a point of removing the stigma from mental health issues. Here are two possible ways:

1. If you’ve experienced burnout or compassion fatigue and feel comfortable sharing that with your team, have a brief moment of honesty and transparency.
2. Share these statistics from a 2015 mental health survey: Nearly one in 10 U.S. veterinarians might experience psychological distress, and more than one in six may have considered suicide.

Be sure to tell your team that the meeting should not be seen as a means of diagnosing and treating mental health issues. Tell them to reach out to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline immediately if they or someone they know is having suicidal thoughts.

**5-MINUTE DISCUSSION: The 12 phases of burnout**
Pass out a copy of the “The 12 Phases of Burnout” to every attendee. Briefly read through the phases and encourage everyone to think about whether or not they’re currently experiencing any of them. Ask your team to discuss (without naming names) if they’ve seen these signs in their coworkers.

Tell your team that burnout can often be “treated” by changing your environment. This can look like solving a persistent problem or getting a fresh start in a new work environment. With that in mind, reassure your team that if they are experiencing burnout, you want to help them if it is within your power. Implore them to speak with you privately to see if there is a way you can make their work environment less stressful.
3-MINUTE ACTIVITY: Compassion fatigue self-test
Give everyone a copy of “Self-test: Are you suffering from compassion fatigue?” and allow them a few minutes to read over the symptoms and either mentally or physically “check” the symptoms they are experiencing.

5-MINUTE DISCUSSION: Compassion fatigue pressure cooker
Pass out copies of “The pressure cooker of veterinary practice.” Give a brief overview of the four levels in chronological order and allow your team time to process where they might stand.
Talk about the compassion trap and how compassion fatigue can affect job performance. Have them look back at the self-test for the full picture of how harmful compassion fatigue can be to themselves, their coworkers and their patients. Explain that unlike burnout, compassion fatigue can’t be solved by changing the work environment. Compassion fatigue is associated with the work they do, so new surroundings won’t solve it.