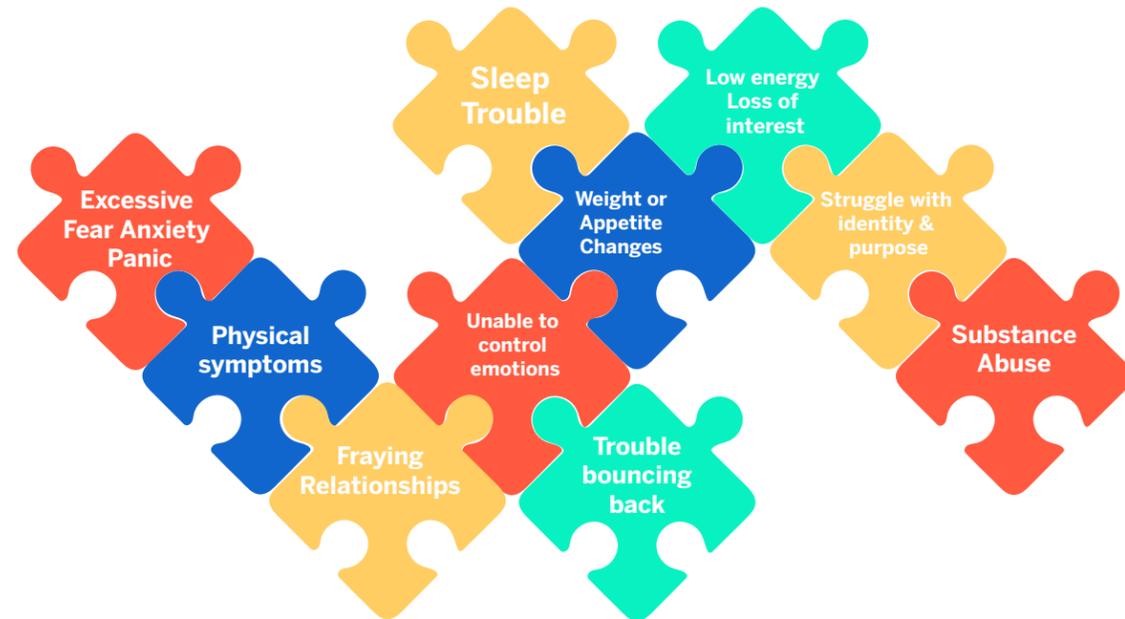


# FROM CRISIS TO EXCELLING: EXPANDING OUR DEFINITION OF HEALTH

BY ELAINE KLEMMENSEN, DVM, CEC



Warning signs of flagging mental health.

Let me begin with a disclaimer. I am a leadership coach, a cultural consultant, and a veterinarian. I am not a psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor, or social worker, nor do I claim any expertise in the arena of well-being or mental health for veterinary professionals. As one who cares deeply about the well-being of the humans behind our hospital doors, I offer my compassion and encouragement. Reach out and seek help if you are struggling. Please know that you are not alone. Know that you matter and know that there is help available. I encourage you to explore the resources offered in the supplementary material for this issue and take the first step toward improving your well-being.

I believe deeply in the power our stories hold. The power that comes from owning and understanding our story and the power our story has to make others feel less alone. In the winter of 2015, I found myself struggling with a deep sense of apathy and exhaustion. I felt like a rubber band that had lost its elasticity—stretched to the point of snapping without the ability to bounce back. Work started to feel like a deep river with a strong current that I needed to cross. If I could just focus on the far shore and swim a little harder, I would get to the other side. I told myself I needed to keep swimming. I had to be the leader my team needed, the veterinarian my clients needed, the mom my kids needed, and the partner my husband needed. Every day, I stepped into my resolve, jumped back into the river, and struggled against the current. Relying on sheer will and stubbornness to drag myself, along with my perfectionism and rescuer mindset, to the other side. Looking back, I am surprised I took so long to hit the metaphorical wall. Until recently, I refused to call it burnout. Me, burnt out? No way! I am tenacious, resilient, and tough. Trapped by my own mental models and limiting beliefs, I called it exhaustion and said, “I just need a change.”

I’ve spent the last three years unravelling what led up to hitting that wall. It would be a lie to say it has been easy or tidily resolved. It has been a messy, humbling, and at times painful process. I try to find some self-compassion and humour as I remind myself how fascinating it is to discover what emerges when I shine a light into the dark places in my psyche. I have learned that when exposed to the light, those dark places start to lose the power they hold over you. Responsibility, achieving, perfection, and the relentless way I pushed myself were coping mechanisms I developed to manage anxiety and mask my deep sense of unworthiness. These feelings stemmed from my childhood

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and followed me into middle age, and my coping behaviours, while unhealthy, made me feel in control, needed, and worthy.

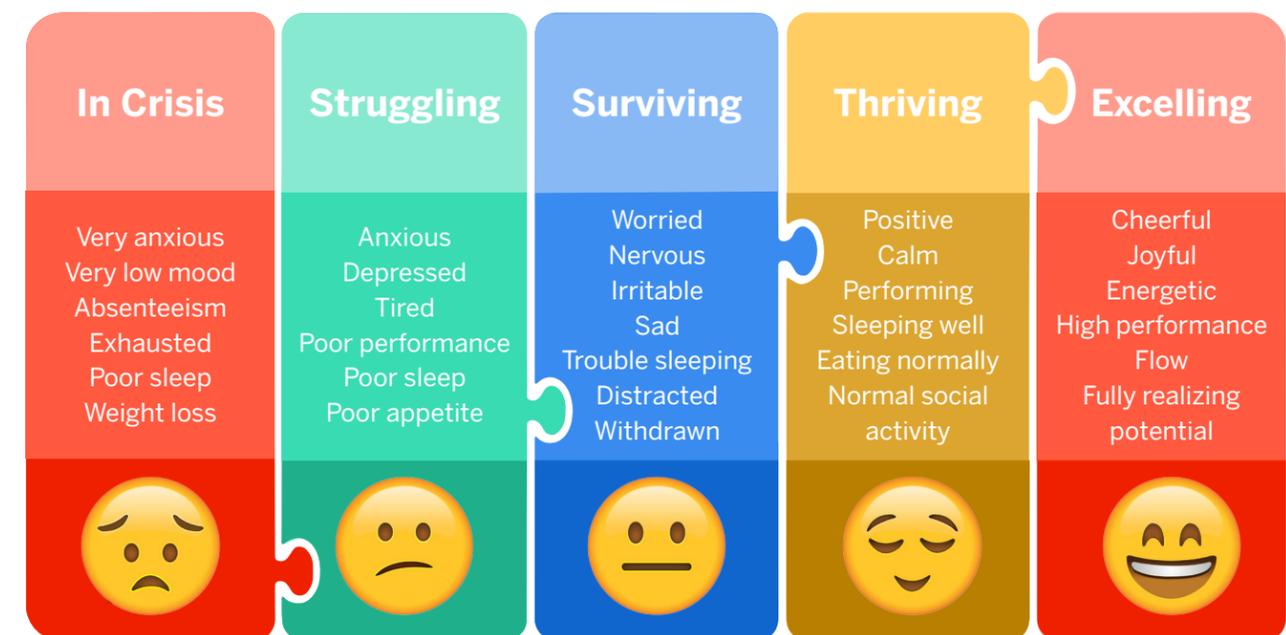
Through this process, I would like to think I have developed a new awareness of what it means to be human. Every single one of us is imperfect, and we’re all struggling with our own fears and limiting beliefs. I have come to think of mental health as a spectrum or continuum (see the well-being continuum below). We are each surfing our own precarious wave of mental well-being—one rogue wave away from slipping off our surfboard. How quickly or easily we find our way back, to ride the next wave, depends on our experience, the weather, the ocean currents, our surfing buddies, and what lies out of sight beneath the blue water.

We need to shift our thinking about mental health to see it as a dynamic process rather than a static one. Being mentally healthy is not simply the absence of illness, but a broader concept of well-being that applies to all of us. The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes [their] own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to [their] community.” Like happiness, thriving and excelling are not places to arrive but states of being we find as we do the work. There are times in our lives where each one of us

needs a little help to work productively and contribute to our community. Broadening our definition of health to encompass physical, social (community), spiritual, and mental well-being helps destigmatize mental illness and makes it easier to ask for help.

To describe the last two years as challenging is an understatement. Workforce shortages, increased demand for our services, and the uncertainty and anxiety arising from a global pandemic are enough to push anyone into a mental health crisis. So how can you tell if you need to up your self-care game or reach out for help? If your symptoms are affecting the quality of your relationships, enjoyment of your favourite activities, or your ability to cope, it may be time to seek extra help. If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others, or you are having thoughts of suicide, please seek help immediately, even if you think you are unlikely to act on them. Signs of declining mental health can sneak up on us and be challenging to recognize. The following are 10 signs, symptoms, and signals that you or a loved one may need some mental health support.

1. Trouble sleeping
2. Changes in appetite and/or weight
3. Trouble controlling your emotions (rapid or uncharacteristic mood swings)
4. Signs of excessive fear or anxiety (panic attacks)



The well-being continuum.

5. Physical symptoms of stress (headaches, gastrointestinal distress, muscle tension)
6. Fraying relationships
7. Loss of interest and low energy (feelings of hopelessness)
8. Over-reliance on alcohol or other substances to cope
9. Struggles with identity and purpose
10. Inability to bounce back from minor setbacks

The Canadian Mental Health Association estimates that in any given year, one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness. Still, it takes courage to reach out and ask for help. Listening to a podcast with the amazing Esther Perel, I was struck by her reflection that North Americans are culturally conditioned for independence. When faced with a problem, most of us immediately ask, “How can I fix this problem?” Growing up in Belgium as the daughter of concentration camp survivors, Esther was conditioned to ask, “Who can help me with this problem?” She wonders, “What might emerge if we flipped the script on our tightly held value of independence?” Many of us worry that asking for help means admitting something is wrong or we are somehow defective. We fear being judged by others. Or perhaps we don’t know where to turn for help. Whether it is joining a gym and stepping on a treadmill or reaching out to a counsellor, making a positive change takes courage. Similar to building a supportive team to meet your fitness goals, consider the following steps to help build your mental well-being team. You don’t need to do it alone. Talk with supportive friends, colleagues, or family members. Share your feelings with them and ask them to be part of your team.

1. Enlist the help of your family doctor. They are a great resource for professionals in your area.
2. Use resources provided by your employer or veterinary association (please see the supplementary material for this issue).
3. Connect with others who have had personal experience with mental health challenges and learn more about their recovery journey.
4. Educate yourself. Learn more about well-being and mental health by reading, listening to podcasts, and attending webinars or lectures by experts in the field.
5. Call a helpline. Find support from anonymous trained professionals 24 hours a day.

As I work on my own well-being, I want to share that I don’t believe I will one day arrive at “excelling” and the work will be finished. The surfboard is a slippery surface. Some days are epic and some days I can’t catch a single wave. It takes practice and commitment to shift the needle in a positive direction. By embracing a holistic view of well-being that encompasses body, mind, and spirit, we all stand to improve our mental health. As you embark on this journey, be as patient and as kind with yourself as you would be to a good friend. Don’t forget to celebrate the wins along the way and remember that together we are stronger. Take care of each other and take care of yourself. [WCV](#)

*To save space, supplementary materials for this article are made available on the Chapter’s website at [www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcu/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine](http://www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcu/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine).*