

MINDFULNESS MICRODOSING FOR BUSY VETERINARY TEAMS

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I am going to let you in on a little secret. Until recently the word “mindfulness” along with any mention of “ashrams” or “meditation retreats” caused my mind to close with an annoying snap. I view myself as open-minded, inclusive, and caring; a person willing to not only explore but also challenge my personal biases. Really, Elaine? Open-minded? What an epic fail. When I reread these words, I not only see the judgment, I feel it. It is a glaring reminder that each of us has blind spots: the inability to notice our own cognitive biases—ways of working, thinking, and reacting that are so deeply ingrained in our world view that we fail to recognize them in ourselves. Over the past year of studying leadership, culture, and coaching, I found myself plunged into some deep reflection, painfully revealing my blind spots. I was not surprised to learn many of my core values are “doing values.” Courage, mentoring, and caring are values I can lean into by “doing.” I have been thinking about why I struggle to embrace simply “being” and how my ego and self-worth have become so intricately linked with productivity, activity, and action. It is high time I explored the benefits of incorporating both attention and intention (my definition of mindfulness) into my life as well as my leadership and coaching practice.

As veterinary professionals, we need to develop skills that allow us to navigate our increasingly complex world. The question is how do we find time to fit these skills into an already overbooked schedule? I believe veterinary teams long to serve their clients and patients with wisdom, empathy, and kindness while maintaining a degree of balance and care for their own well-being. The negative consequences of ignoring the effects of cumulative workplace stress, unrealistic client demands, unhealthy boundaries, and toxic team cultures have been well documented. Too often the urgent needs of our patients and the non-stop demands of our clients mean we run from one task to the next with little time to think about our own needs, let alone consider the impact this lack of mindfulness can have on our co-workers and those we lead.

COVID-19 has changed our business landscape and impacted the culture of many organizations. As we adapt to this changing landscape, the demand for our services combined with workforce shortages will stretch our teams and make our working lives busier than ever. Micropractices are intentional moments of mindfulness performed in conjunction with other routines during your day. They offer a simple, sustainable opportunity to introduce microdoses of self-care to a busy schedule. Best of all, anyone can learn these tools and quickly incorporate them into their daily routine. Tying micropractices to an existing activity embeds new habits, offering the opportunity to connect with your emotions, centre your mind and body, and consider the kind of presence you want to bring into your next appointment, surgery, or client interaction.

To begin incorporating mindfulness micropractices into your day, start by identifying activities that are regular or recurring events in your schedule. By tying micropractices or “wellness moments” to these daily events, we have the opportunity to not only shift our own focus and mood but also affect the experience of those around us in a positive way. Any recurring event can serve as a cue for a wellness self-check-in:

- As you wait for your morning coffee or tea to brew
- While you pack your child’s lunch box
- As you wait at a red light on the way to work
- While you scrub for surgery
- Before you grab the chart and walk into the exam room
- As you wait for your team to assemble and start morning rounds
- During your commute home as you shift from work to home life

Veterinary teams are presented with a continuous stream of external and internal stimuli to which our sympathetic nervous systems are programmed to react. Learning how to create a space between a stimulus and your reaction allows you to buffer your emotional **reaction** and shift to an intentional **response**. Learning how to pay attention to your emotions and become more intentional in the moment is a skill anyone can learn. This process is unique to each of us, so take the time to test different tools to discover which ones resonate with you.



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NAME IT AND TAME IT

Acknowledging and naming our emotional state is the first step in developing self-awareness and self-management. The cognitive process of recognizing what you are feeling and naming it shifts brain activity from the amygdala, the emotional centre of the brain, to the prefrontal cortex, the higher-order thinking part of the brain. This shift acts as a reset button, bringing a new awareness and a sense of calm. It effectively moves you from a place of reaction to one of reflection.

FOCUSED BREATHING

Diaphragmatic breathing (or belly breathing) is thought to act by increasing parasympathetic activation, with studies showing an improvement in levels of salivary cortisol and blood pressure as well as self-reported stress levels by those who practice this technique. The technique can be used before making a difficult phone call, while waiting for your morning coffee to brew, or even before entering the exam room.

THREE GOOD THINGS

Another evidence-based practice that can benefit frazzled professionals is the act of writing down three things one is grateful for. This can be done daily or several times a week. It is a simple practice that has been shown to increase levels of well-being. Consider extending this practice into a group setting by starting morning rounds or team meetings by sharing “three good things” that team members identify or by giving “you’re awesome” kudos to team members who have gone above and beyond for patients, coworkers, or clients. Our minds are biased to notice danger and risk. Becoming intentional about where we place our focus and shifting our attention to notice the good things can restore balance, stimulate positive emotions, and build relationships among team members.

LEARN TO S.T.O.P.

An overbooked schedule, challenging cases, and concerned owners can quickly push us into “overdrive” mode at work. Commit to learning how to reset during the day using a technique known as S.T.O.P.

- **Stop:** Interrupt your “automatic pilot” mode to concentrate on the present moment.
- **Take:** Take a breath or do some diaphragmatic breathing. Focus on bringing your attention to your breathing.
- **Observe:** Observe the moment. How are you feeling? Name it, tame it, and let it go. What do you need (are you hungry or thirsty, or do you just need a moment to think)?
- **Process and proceed:** Reconnect with your surroundings. Communicate what you need to others and move forward with intention.

Intentional activity is one factor that can improve chronic happiness levels. By choosing where to focus our attention, becoming intentional about our response, and learning how to attach microdoses of mindfulness to recurring events in our day-to-day activities, we can build new resources for our wellness toolbox. Having a robust set of tools to develop self-awareness and manage stress will be invaluable as veterinary teams continue to navigate the challenging and changing landscape ahead. [WCV](#)

REFERENCES

In the interest of saving space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter’s website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/wcv-references-september-2020.pdf.

