



# *The Link Between Healthy Workplace Culture and Optimal Personal Wellbeing*



## **AAHA CULTURE ROUNDTABLE**

Listen in on the conversation to learn why these experts believe wellbeing and practice culture are inextricably linked, and what you can do to improve them both.

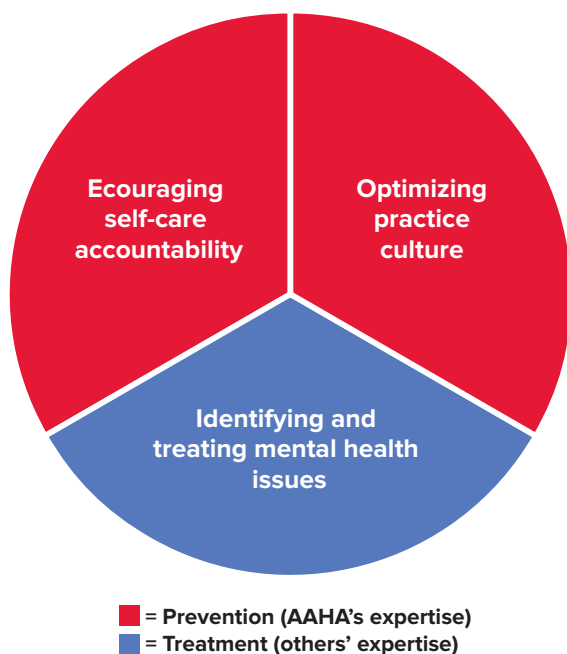
**AAHA IS LAUNCHING A MAJOR INITIATIVE** to address well-being by using a positive, proactive approach to help prevent or mitigate mental health issues in veterinary practice teams. We intend to do this by encouraging practice team members to embrace the benefits of self-care and to provide practices with the resources to optimize their workplace culture.

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**Personal wellbeing and workplace culture impact and apply to every member of the veterinary practice team.**

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One of the ways we're supporting this initiative is by tapping into the expertise of those in the trenches of wellbeing and culture transformation. We've convened these experts for a roundtable discussion on this topic.



*“It’s a joy for me to be a part of AAHA’s very inspired vision, which I think is novel and important in moving the conversation forward in a proactive instead of a reactive way in the profession.”*

—ELIZABETH STRAND, PHD, LCSW

**Heather B. Loenser, DVM:** Hello, everyone, and thank you for being here. The purpose of today’s roundtable is to discuss the value of self-care and the value of a healthy workplace culture as it relates to the importance of personal wellbeing and practice wellbeing.

### The Challenges We Face as Veterinary Healthcare Providers

**“Recent research and even our own personal experiences suggest that veterinary caregivers may be at greater risk of mental health challenges than the population at large due to a multitude of factors, including perfectionism.”**

—MICHELE GASPAR, DVM, DABVP (FELINE), MA, LCPC

**HL:** Why might the veterinary profession be predisposed to mental health challenges and be so affected by our workplace culture?

**Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LCPC:** I think there are several reasons for that. Over the last 20 years, there’s been a gender shift in the profession, and research tells us women are more likely to suffer from mood disorders, particularly depression and anxiety. I also think that there is a subset of people who enter the veterinary profession who have significant trauma histories that make them vulnerable individuals in provocative environments.

Additionally, we see widespread perfectionism and unyielding standards, which, while helpful when competing academically to enter the profession, prove to be detrimental in the unpredictable environment of practicing the art of medicine under the scrutiny of the public.

So, in my opinion, it's a potent combination of, perhaps, a gender shift, a way of thinking about ourselves that we need to be perfect, and then, for some of us, a history that makes us particularly prone to be hard on ourselves.

But the good news is there are definitely things we can do to address these issues, such as putting a focus on our own self-care.

## The Importance of Self-Care

**"I want to say to the veterinary professionals, you have to take care of yourself. This is nonnegotiable, and if you want to stay in practice and to achieve as a veterinarian, self-care is a requirement."**

—ELIZABETH STRAND, PHD, LCSW

**"If we're going to stay in this profession and be successful, then we really have to look after ourselves."**

—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

**HL:** Dr. Holowaychuk, you speak about finding simple ways for team members to improve their own personal wellness, but we often hear them say that they don't have enough time, or they wonder if this can even help them. What advice would you give them?

**Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT:** I would say, start with things that are simple and achievable. Anything is possible. The important thing is for individuals to start where they are right now and recognize what works for them. For example, for many, going from getting four hours of sleep a night to getting eight hours of sleep a night is not realistic or possible, given all of the things we're balancing in our lives. However, even just adding 30 minutes a night to a person's sleep schedule can make a tremendous amount of difference.

When it comes to mindfulness, it may be before I go into every single appointment, I'm going to stop, and I'm going to take a deep breath, and I'm just going to notice how my body feels. I'm going to notice the thoughts in my mind, and I'm going to set an intention to be present with this client for this appointment.



## Self-Care Strategies for Veterinary Teams

- Improving sleep hygiene
- Practicing gratitude
- Practicing mindfulness
- Doing yoga
- Volunteering

**HL:** Dr. Gaspar, knowing what we know about how veterinary caregivers may be "hardwired," what are specific actions they can take to improve their own wellbeing?

**MG:** Just because veterinary health professionals may be hardwired to be at greater risk to experience mental health challenges doesn't mean there aren't specific steps we can take to build up our own resiliency and rise above this predisposition.

I think the most important thing that I would like us to develop is a sense of self-compassion, and that is to treat ourselves as a good friend would. If your friend made a mistake or was feeling overwhelmed, you would encourage and support them, not berate them. We do the latter to ourselves all the time, and that is counterproductive.

We also need to develop a wide social network, and one of the things that I do think would be very helpful is if we disengage ourselves from—not all, but many—hobbies that tend to be animal-centric. Stepping into a hobby that doesn't call on our veterinary knowledge but rather creates a connection with others based on other interests allows our "veterinary brains" to quiet down. We know that we're biologically programmed to be in relationship with others, and that's absolutely where our healing takes place.

**HL:** Dr. Holowaychuk, I know you are a big proponent of yoga and expressing gratitude as self-care strategies. Tell us more about those practices.



**MH:** I think a lot of people have the misconception that yoga is just for “bendy people.” In reality, yoga has little to do with physical flexibility. Instead, the whole practice of yoga encourages us to notice our thoughts, those sensations, and train ourselves to stick with them. We observe them. We try to stay open, nonjudgmental, and curious about the experience. The more that we can practice that on the yoga mat, the more we bring open-minded attitudes into our daily life.

Practicing gratitude is an easy way for people to embrace an attitude that really fosters happiness. There’s a lot of research that suggests that gratitude can override other negative emotions, like grief, sadness, and anger.

I know it seems overwhelming, but even if people just pick one of the many self-care strategies that feels doable, it can make a huge, huge difference in their personal wellbeing.

### Providing Veterinary Care Is Challenging and Stressful, Even Under the Best of Conditions

**“Veterinary teams experience predictable stress that affects us as individuals and as team members. We can’t decouple the impact that personal wellbeing has on practice wellbeing. To minimize stress for both the individual and the team . . . a healthy workplace culture is essential. Our goal is to harness the passion of team members, enabling them to deliver the highest quality patient and client care.”**

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

**HL:** Dr. Strand, in your experience, what are the common forms of workplace distress that veterinary teams experience?

**Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW:** Veterinarians and veterinary teams regularly face moral distress, which is having a gut feeling of what the right thing is to do, but external factors prevent you from being able to do it. A classic example is when there may be disagreement as to the appropriate time for euthanasia during the course of providing terminal critical care.

There’s also the distress of emotional labor, which occurs when team members cannot express publicly emotions that they may be feeling privately, such as having to seem joyful to meet a new puppy or kitten after just finishing a tough euthanasia.



Veterinarians and veterinary teams are faced with that emotional stress every day, and that requires an emotional labor of having to conceal feelings that are socially inappropriate.

Both emotional labor and moral distress can be exhausting, often creating “short fuses” and team conflict. Veterinary team conflict is expected and normal; however, when not managed well or addressed, it can really negatively impact morale and, ultimately, patient care.

**Randy Hall:** I’d like to piggyback on what Dr. Strand said about “short fuses.” There is a term called “decision fatigue” that we’re learning really affects veterinary teams when making decisions, not only about medical cases, animals, and clients, but also coworkers and other colleagues. They need to be able to analyze and communicate their decisions quickly and compassionately—all the time. At some point, they get exhausted from all that self-regulation and “decision fatigue.” That filter that keeps us from saying things we shouldn’t or behaving in ways we shouldn’t breaks down. When this happens on a daily basis, conflict and negativity permeate the practice culture.

**HL:** So what can we do to lessen this inevitable distress?

**ES:** I’m a big proponent of the concept of “name it to tame it.” Human beings have natural resiliency and the ability to recover from stressful situations when they’re able to put into words what was stressful to them, in a supportive environment. I recommend veterinary practices’ leaders initiate

weekly “moral distress meetings” that are designed to give an opportunity for everybody on the team to talk about those cases or interactions that kept them up at night. These feelings and thoughts can be shared in a supportive team environment and normalized. I also think that in these distress meetings, it’s important to engage in laughter. I have found when I started asking in the distress meetings, “What was funny about the stressful situation?” that laughing together helped the group to recover. I also recommend yearly practice team training in communication skills and conflict-resolution techniques.

**HL:** So, Dr. Kanara, do you see a link between the stressors that individuals and teams encounter and workplace culture?

**Ed Kanara, DVM, DABVP:** Absolutely. The stressors that Elizabeth and Randy have just discussed are either amplified by a toxic culture or lessened by a healthy culture because of the way a practice acknowledges and deals with these stressors.

However, we also have to recognize what motivates veterinary team members. We all want to make a difference. It’s this desire—not money—that is the currency that often most motivates veterinary colleagues. With salaries for veterinarians not being particularly high and support staff’s financial compensation being almost inadequate, that feeling of “making a difference” is vital to feeling valued and personal wellbeing. Really, all the preceding discussion has been about the importance of culture—creating a workplace that, in the face of inevitable stress, enables team members to realize their passion, to feel purpose, and to know they’re making a difference doing what they love to do.

*“I do want to emphasize that there is no substitute for professional intervention for mental health issues—really across the spectrum—and there is no shame in seeking out professional help.”*

—MICHELE GASPAR, DVM, DABVP (FELINE), MA, LCPC

## The Importance of a Healthy Workplace Culture

**“The decision that an owner or partner makes to commit to a formal culture transformation process can be one of the most important decisions they will ever make as a leader of the practice. The positive outcomes that result because of a healthy culture will be ‘game changing,’ and the negative consequences of this unrealized opportunity can be profound and should not be underestimated.”**

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

**HL:** Mr. Hall, how can a practice team get started working on their culture?

**RH:** Two steps: define and align. The first one is to define. Most practices have not defined, as a group, the culture they want to have. For example, “How do we want to deal with the stress here? How do we want to communicate and solve problems here? How do we want to support each other through the changes and challenges that we face?” And until we’ve done that, there’s no way to align the behaviors that are expected versus the behaviors that are impulsive, so there’s no compass associated with the culture.

The second step is to align on the behaviors that are critical for the practice’s success. For example, “We recognize that the gossiping in this practice is causing problems. So, we agree to give ourselves permission and commit to call each other out on it and say we won’t tolerate it or participate in it.” Everybody doing simple things together can make a huge difference in the culture.

**HL:** Dr. Kanara, we’ve all been using the term “workplace culture” today, which can mean different things to different people. How do you define “workplace culture” per se?

**EK:** I define culture as what results from adherence to workplace behaviors that have been determined to be essential for achieving the organizational goals and consistent with the organization’s values. So, as Randy just said, first you have to define what you want to be, and that’s your values and your goals. Then you align the behaviors necessary to achieve those

goals. It's also important for leadership to reward expected behavior and have the courage to address unacceptable behavior.

**HL:** So, Dr. Kanara, who do you consider responsible for developing a healthy practice culture?

**EK:** Some people suggest that developing a healthy culture is “everybody’s job,” and that’s true, but only to a certain extent. I believe that culture is really leadership driven. It’s a top-down effort since practice leadership must see the value, have an appreciation for the effort required, and enthusiastically champion what’s in it for the entire practice team, as well as what’s in it for patients and pet owners. But, most importantly, successfully assessing the current culture and implementing an improved one requires that every stakeholder have a significant voice in helping to shape the new culture. Without genuine buy-in from the entire team, successful culture transformation will not happen.

**HL:** Mr. Hall, what would you say to practice owners who may be concerned that culture transformation may be too difficult to tackle?

**RH:** I would reassure them that, while this is not easy, it’s not as hard as many other challenges they or the practice have already faced and conquered—for example, going paperless or changing computer systems or adding new, sophisticated medical services. They can do this—there are proven diagnostics, tools, and processes that can guide them through the process—and I know that AAHA is going to help them make it happen.

**Is It Worth the Time and Effort It May Take to Transform a Practice’s Culture?**

**“I think it is definitely worth it, and the research backs this up . . . I see evidence of it every day working with practices.”**

—RANDY HALL

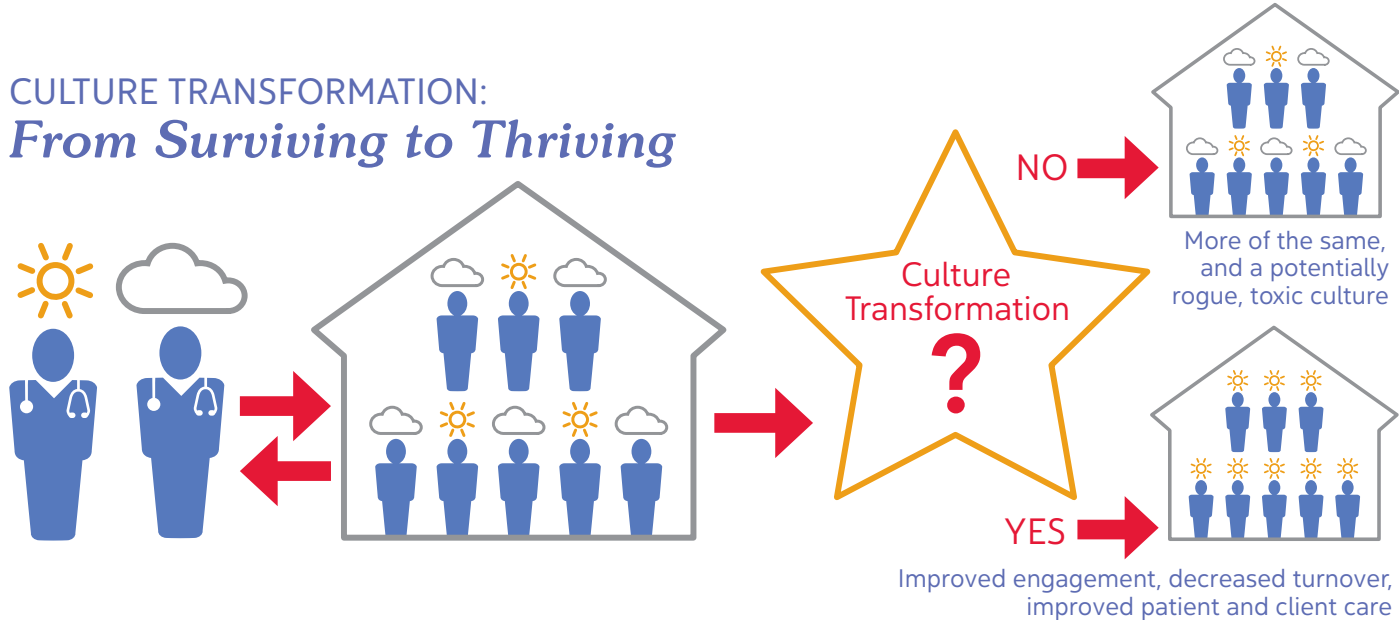
**“I would say absolutely. I think that some of the mental health issues that we face can be prevented when we work in a healthy practice culture.”**

—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

**“Yes. If an organization does not take the time and effort to determine its culture, a ‘rogue’ culture will emerge, whether we recognize it as such or not. Often, when we just let culture ‘happen,’ it’s characterized by ambiguity, lack of consistency of job expectations, and frustration over what may be perceived as a lack of leadership from practice owners or managers.”**

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

**CULTURE TRANSFORMATION:  
From Surviving to Thriving**



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—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

**HL:** I’m going to go around the table and ask everybody this last question. Given that it will require time and effort for a practice to take the steps necessary to transform their culture, is it worth it?

**ES:** I think that some mental health issues can be remedied by a culture that supports the self-care techniques that have been mentioned: exercise, meditation, social support, and sleep. So, therefore, I do believe that cultural transformation is worth it, based not only on my social work experience, but also grounded in the research on incivility and rudeness in the human medical environment and its impact on satisfaction in the workplace and on the bottom line: patient care. So it’s definitely worth it!

**MH:** I think that practices are going to realize in the coming years that if we don’t start to foster practice wellbeing and a healthy workplace culture, we’re not going to be able to retain staff, and it’s going to lead to more problems down the line. So, I think it is absolutely important to emphasize coming together as a group and holding each other accountable, which will have tremendous benefits for the practice team.

**RH:** I think it is definitely worth it, and the research backs this up, along with my experience in practices. There was a summary done of 12 or 13 different studies on employee engagement, and essentially what it said was engaged workplaces—places that have fully engaged employees—are more profitable, are more productive, can change faster, and have lower attrition rates. More highly capable and talented and productive people want to work there. They attract better talent.

**EK:** As a former practice owner, I understand taking on any initiative that involves behavior changes for your team is a significant commitment, but, from my perspective, the answer to Heather’s question is irrefutably ‘yes, it’s worth it.’ It would seem, then, based on the comments from our mental health experts, that we can certainly help prevent or help mitigate

some of the mental health challenges that team members face. Of course, the positive business outcomes that result from culture transformation, such as increased productivity, decreased staff turnover, improved customer service, and even the quality of human patient care have been well documented.

**MG:** I do want to emphasize that there is no substitute for professional intervention for mental health issues—really across the spectrum—and there is no shame in seeking out professional help. However, research across multiple disciplines shows that mindfulness practice, gratitude, physical exercise, validation, support, having one’s voice heard, and being able to have agency certainly ameliorate mood disorders and unhelpful ways of seeing ourselves. Taking an active role in our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others with whom we spend hours every day is worth it. It is something that we all need to jump into with both feet, because, as we take care of ourselves and take care of others, that just makes the entire world a better place.

**HL:** Thank you, everyone, for spending time with us today, sharing your insights and experience. I know I’ve learned a lot.

*AAHA hopes that the recommendations of our experts have been helpful to you. Visit [aaha.org/culture](http://aaha.org/culture) for more materials to help you begin to transform your culture.*



Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LCPC, cares for pets and people as a practicing board-certified feline specialist, psychotherapist, and member of Vets4Vets, a service that helps veterinary students and veterinarians with personal and professional issues.



Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT, is a board-certified emergency and critical care specialist and certified yoga instructor who champions wellness in the veterinary profession.



Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW, is the founding director of Veterinary Social Work and a clinical associate professor at the University of Tennessee Colleges of Social Work and Veterinary Medicine.



Randy Hall is a leadership trainer, executive coach, and CEO of 4th Gear Consulting, primarily serving veterinary hospitals to help them execute cultural change.



Edward Kanara, DVM, DABVP, has been a veterinary practice owner, held various senior executive positions at Pfizer Animal Health, led multiple culture-change efforts in both large and small organizations, and is the managing member of the Kanara Consulting Group, LLC.



Heather B. Loenser, DVM, is AAHA’s Veterinary Advisor for Public and Professional Affairs, a veterinary communication coach, and a practicing general practice and emergency veterinarian.





The Standard of  
Veterinary Excellence

Established in 1933 by leaders in the veterinary profession, AAHA is best known for its accreditation of companion animal veterinary practices. To become accredited, companion animal hospitals undergo regular comprehensive evaluations by AAHA veterinary experts who evaluate the practice on approximately 900 standards of veterinary care. AAHA also develops publications and educational programs and resources designed to help companion animal hospitals thrive. Today, more than 3,700 practice teams (15% of all veterinary practices in the United States and Canada) are AAHA accredited. For more information about AAHA, visit [aaha.org](http://aaha.org).

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