

Central Line: The AAHA Podcast Transcript

Episode Title: Are Veterinary Professionals Tough Enough?

Guest: Steve Magness

0:00:04.0 Katie Berlin: Hi, welcome back to Central Line. I'm your host, Katie Berlin, and I have a super special guest with us today, who is not from the veterinary world, so it's a nice treat, and I'm really, really excited that he's taken the time to spend with us this morning. Steve Magness, welcome to Central Line.

0:00:22.6 Steve Magness: Oh, thanks so much for having me. Really looking forward to the conversation.

0:00:27.5 Katie Berlin: So Steve, you are... I'm super familiar with your work because I've been listening to you on podcasts and reading your books for quite a while now, but I know a lot of the veterinary audience probably isn't quite as familiar, especially if they're not into the sports. So, would you mind just giving us a little bit of background on who you are and what you do?

0:00:48.2 Steve Magness: Yeah, absolutely. So my background is in sport, like you mentioned, in particular running. I grew up as a very successful young long distance runner, and then translated that into running in college and a little bit after, and then when I was forced to move on to the real world, I got into the world of coaching and just helping people do better at whatever they're pursuing, so initially that was all in sport and all in running, coaching runners. But since then in the past, I don't know decade, I've expanded out to hopefully help others perform in whatever they're doing, in whatever avenue they're taking, because what I believe is performance is performance, it doesn't matter if we're getting ready to do something in the office space or lining up for the marathon, a lot of the skills translate.

0:01:42.3 Katie Berlin: I love that so much because I've noticed that in my own life. And while I never ran a 401 mile [chuckle], if I run an eight-minute mile it's a good day, but just the thought of being able to pick something up new as an adult and learn so much that I didn't know I was capable of through running and fitness, it's really just done wonders for my confidence in other areas in life, and I just really... I'm super passionate about that. So that's one of the reasons I love your book so much.

0:02:17.6 Katie Berlin: So Steve, you're here because you just had a new book come out and it's great. I was so excited, I pre-ordered it and I was so excited when it arrived because it came with an email from you that said, "Hey, if you have a podcast, let me know". And so instantly, I put the book down and emailed you, and I'm so excited that you're here. The book is called "Do Hard Things", and the subtitle is "Why We Get Resilience Wrong and the Surprising Science of Real Toughness". And this is just so intriguing to me. Can you just give us just a brief nutshell version of why you wrote this book?

0:03:00.8 Steve Magness: Yeah, absolutely. To me I wrote it, again, maybe starting from the sport background of sport, especially running is all about handling difficult moments and in difficult situations, essentially wrestling with the doubt, the insecurities, that little voice in your head that maybe tells you to slow down or stop. And what I quickly realized is, those same doubts and insecurities, they weren't specific to sport, they're part of the human condition.

0:03:31.3 Steve Magness: We all wrestle with those things, and when I looked at, okay, how do we navigate this? How do we deal with this? A lot of the models or the teaching were a little what I'd call "old school", in the sense that it just told us like, "Oh, just put your head down and grind through it and get through the work, and that's how you accomplish everything" and that to me is like giving someone a hammer and saying, "Here's your hammer, fix everything with it." And that just isn't realistic. So hopefully this book gets across a new model, which is like, Hey, we can develop a wide array of tools to be able to develop some resilience and get through difficult moments or difficult pursuits in your life.

0:04:24.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, and so applicable to veterinary medicine, as we'll talk about in a little bit, but speaking of vet med I... Is this your first veterinary podcast? [chuckle]

0:04:36.1 Steve Magness: It is, you... This is very different from the others but I'm excited. As I told you in emails, my wife and I are pet people, we have a dog, and then we actually have two sugar gliders.

0:04:51.1 Katie Berlin: Really?

0:04:53.0 Steve Magness: So their kind of our... Yeah, our exotic pet, but we love animals.

0:04:55.9 Katie Berlin: Well, that's kinda brave of you, I'm a little bit scared of the very tinies. I've stuck to cat and dogs in practice and so I'm... The sugar gliders were, well, they weren't always pets where I was living, but... Yeah, they're a little bit scary to me, so that you're braver than I am. And I won't touch a bird, I'm just not touching a bird ever, 'cause I'm afraid it's gonna die if I touch it.

0:05:18.5 Steve Magness: Oh Gosh.

0:05:20.7 Katie Berlin: But yeah, I love the story about how your wife found Willy in a tire on a run. I love that 'cause it's so characteristic of how so many vets and vet professionals found their pets too, is just a bad situation, at the right time.

0:05:35.7 Steve Magness: Yeah, exactly. To fill in the listeners is, my wife found our dog. He was in a tire on the side of the road, on a dirt road, kind of in the middle of nowhere in Texas, and he was only a couple months old, and she picked him up and said, "Hey, I'm gonna..." She actually tried to figure out and get help, but couldn't, so she took him in and initially he had a lot of worms and all those kind of nasty things, so we were very fortunate to have a vet take care of him and now... Gosh, seven years later, he's a healthy happy dog who still has a little bit of that wild streak in him.

0:06:20.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:06:22.0 Steve Magness: He got quite the personality.

0:06:25.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I've heard you talk about him on your podcast before, and I love the sort of attachment and just the spirit of your love for him that I heard in those conversations. I think we all as vet pet people can relate to just, there's something that you can't get anywhere else that you can get from your pets. And especially dogs, it's just a different kind of love, I think. But I was just wondering, I know you're doing a whole bunch of podcasts right now to promote your book,

and you're very used to podcasting anyway, just another day for you, but why did you say yes to doing a vet podcast? Do you have a certain attachment to the vet community, do you know anything about what kinds of challenges we're facing?

0:07:13.9 Steve Magness: I do, to a degree. As I said, I've always been an animal person, a dog person as well, and then growing up... So our vet, when I was a runner in high school, our vet was like the first hardcore runner I think I knew who was an adult.

0:07:34.6 Katie Berlin: Oh, I love that.

0:07:34.9 Steve Magness: So he would literally come to a lot of my cross country and track meets, and he was a big influence on me as a runner, so I've always... And we'd have conversations obviously on running, but also what it entails to be a vet and the challenges behind that, and also I remember conversations on how his daily run kind of cleared his mind and helped him develop some of the skills that allowed him to kinda get through the challenges that he was going through. Although I'm not intimately familiar with it... Animals have always been a big part of my life, and I've always had a lot of respect for the people who do the best and help us take care of them.

0:08:22.6 Katie Berlin: I love that. Yeah, thank you. Well, thank you for saying yes, this is a real treat. And before we go on to talk about the book and the concepts in it, I have one, I like to ask a personal question at the beginning 'cause I feel like we always learn a lot about each other when we ask these kinds of questions, and so I actually was curious to know what kind of dog you think you would be.

[laughter]

0:08:42.6 Steve Magness: What kind of dog would I... Oh gosh.

0:08:45.9 Katie Berlin: I have some thoughts for what you might answer, but I'm very curious what you'll say.

0:08:51.5 Steve Magness: That's a good question. I have no idea. What I'm gonna give is, I'll give the cop-out answers, I would probably be some random combination of mutt.

0:09:05.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:09:05.9 Steve Magness: Because it's like, my interests are so contrasting in the sense that I love sport and all that stuff, but deep down inside, I'm this hardcore nerd. It's this contrast of loving all sport, but also just geeking out in the science and all that good stuff.

0:09:27.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:09:27.9 Steve Magness: And I love exercise, obviously, so I'd be one of those dogs with way too much energy that needs way too many walks.

0:09:34.5 Katie Berlin: My money was on, you were gonna say like a shelter mutt, where everyone would look and guess, and not be able to know for sure. Or you were gonna say you were a heeler mix.

0:09:44.0 Steve Magness: I like it, I like it.

0:09:48.4 Katie Berlin: Alright, well, that's awesome. I'm a mutt too, so I am a fan. Well, let's get into it. This book... So I have to say, this book is not what I expected when I saw the cover. I... Probably you get this a lot, I thought it was gonna be sort of a "Discipline is your freedom", Jocko Willink type book about toughness. And I've long been a fan of the idea of something I heard... Actually, it was Joe De Sena, the Spartan founder, who I recently heard on another podcast, and he was the opposite of everything that was in this book when he was on that podcast.

0:10:29.3 Katie Berlin: So we won't get into that, but he talks about this thing called "obstacle immunity", where you choose to do hard things and you push through them and then you learn something about yourself that helps you push through things that you can't choose that are tough. And Jocko Willink has this sort of, this very military view of discipline is your freedom and you get up at 4:00 AM, and you run when your feet hurt, and that gives you the power to get through your day without complaining. And yet I still burned out in vet med, even though I was running marathons with burning feet in a flood, I could do that no problem. And I would do it again, and I still didn't wanna be in the clinic anymore.

0:11:14.7 Katie Berlin: And I think that's pretty common, and I was just wondering what you think about that, whether those concepts are being phased out now, are we proving them wrong or can they co-exist with what you talk about in the book.

0:11:25.0 Steve Magness: Yeah, that's a good question. What I would say is twofold, there's a lot of nuance around here, and those kind of methods that Jocko and others espouse, they have... I think they have their place, and they can be incredibly important tools to utilize, but I think we make the mistake when we say this is like, this applies to everything, then this is it. There are times, as you know, as a runner, where you're just gonna have to be like, "This sucks, I'm gonna put my head down and I'm just gonna survive and get through this."

0:12:00.6 Steve Magness: And that's a legitimate strategy and something that we have to do. But that doesn't always apply to other aspects of our life. And often it can backfire, and I'll give you the example, if you feel burned out, like you said, as a vet med, then no amount of putting your head down and trying to push through is gonna help, in fact, it's going to backfire because the thing you are trying to double down on is the thing that is leading to and contributing to that burn out.

0:12:32.5 Steve Magness: So you have to take a different approach, and I think that's where I'm arguing is that, so much of the dialogue here around is that, just push through, do very difficult things, and I'm saying, "Hey, that's important." It's the title of the book, but the book's title is hopefully there, as you noticed, to draw you in and then to say, "Hey, that's important, we need to do challenging things, but also consider that there's a bunch of different other methods and ways to get through things as well as you're doing the difficult thing."

0:13:08.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah, and so what are some of those ways? You have... There was a quote I really liked towards the beginning of the book, you said, "Give people a choice and let them train hopefulness." I just love that idea. I love the idea of training hopefulness because I feel like a lot of times in society now, especially on social media, we're training sort of a learned helplessness, and I was curious to hear what you meant by that, what does mean to train hopefulness?

0:13:35.6 Steve Magness: Yeah. Essentially, it's the power of giving people a choice and allowing them to have autonomy and choose. And when we do that, not surprisingly, good things can happen. And what often what we do, and this actually comes out of research way back, in the learned helplessness community where they initially looked at dogs and essentially not giving dogs a choice, and that trained helplessness is what they thought. But what they really realized over in re-evaluating that research is that it's not about helplessness, it's about giving people the choice so that you can train this helpfulness and train this hopeful muscle.

0:14:21.0 Steve Magness: Which to me is simply... Whenever we're going through uncomfortable things or challenging times, it often feels like we're trapped, and when we feel like we're trapped, we almost default towards apathy. And then we get scolded and we say like, "Why aren't you motivated? Why aren't you disciplined? Why aren't you doing these things?" But the reality is, when we feel trapped, when we feel like apathy is the only answer when we don't have a path forward, then it's natural and it's human to default to that self-protection.

0:14:57.6 Steve Magness: So instead, what do we do? When we're in those difficult moments, we look for the small places where we can flex that hopeful muscle, which means like having a choice and having a voice, and seeing that even in the difficult moments, we can control some aspect of this. And if we can do that, we're gonna be in a better place.

0:15:19.4 Steve Magness: And not to bring it to athletics, but they are really good at finding ways to assert control even under uncertain moments. One of the ways you see it often in professional sports is all those crazy routines that you see athletes do, like the professional tennis players, like Rafael Nadal, who set up their water bottles in a specific order and go through the same routine. Why do they do that? It's simple, they're asserting some sort of control and making the choice to do these things in an environment where a lot of times it's a lot of luck in a lot of uncertainties, so just those small moments give us... Wrestle back that control so that we can train that hopeful muscle.

0:16:06.5 Katie Berlin: That's making me... That's looking at... We have this thing in Vet Med where we have these pens we really like, and so if you steal someone's pen in the clinic, it's like a mortal sin, 'cause that's your lucky pen, or it's your good pen. Like I'm holding on to that pen 'till it dies. And I'm starting to see that in a new light now. [chuckle] It's like, no matter what happens today, I'm keeping my pen. And I used to come to clinic, to the clinic with this massive bag of snacks, and I do get hangry, I'm a very hangry person, I have to eat regularly, and I was constantly eating something, but I also feel like that was a way to control my environment a little bit. When you don't know what's gonna walk in the door or how your day is gonna go, but I know I have snacks.

0:16:50.8 Steve Magness: I love it. And that's actually what it all is about, it's when our environment feels uncertain and uncontrollable, we just default to threat and protect mode.

0:17:03.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:17:03.9 Steve Magness: So sometimes the smallest things where it's like, no matter how my day is, I've got my bag of snacks and I can always go back to my bag of snacks. That, again, and there's fascinating neuroscience behind this, there's that almost like decreases that alarm, makes us feel a little bit more secure, and when we feel secure, we can then approach even difficult moments out of

a place of curiosity and freedom versus like, "Oh, I have to do this", or "Oh, I'm forced to do this and I have no control and no say, this is just getting dumped upon me" and that's not a good place to perform out of.

0:17:44.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's super interesting. I was thinking a lot about the culture of Vet Med while I was reading your book because I was trying to think, do we have a traditional culture of toughness? Where it's like, keep a stiff upper lip, put your head down, just grind it out. Or do we have a culture where it's okay to make decisions for yourself. And resilience is seen slightly differently, and I think it's obviously very practice-dependent, like where you practice is gonna be different and how your managers are.

0:18:18.1 Katie Berlin: But coming through school, I think it is very clear that we're supposed to just be traditionally tough. We don't get any sleep and we're working on call, and we're working 14-16 hours in the clinic and trying to learn things and having to shout-out answers on rounds, and otherwise we'll feel stupid and this is all with the goal of getting out so you can do it for real. And I remember at my first job, I was working at a really good clinic, it was an AAHA certified, AAHA credited clinic, and it was a very... It was full of technicians who knew what they were doing and other doctors to support me. On the surface, very supportive environment.

0:19:01.0 Katie Berlin: And I remember one of the first really busy days that we had there, and I was feeling just under water and I probably had two cases, but I was a brand new vet, so I didn't know what to do, and I just felt completely overwhelmed. And I turned to one of the technicians and I said, "I am completely overwhelmed." And she looked at me and she said, "Okay, hot tip. Don't say that out loud to us," and I was like, Oh... And it was years before I felt comfortable saying it again, and even though I was overwhelmed many times during those years, and yet since I started saying it again, I feel like all the good things in life, whether career or personal life, have happened to me because I was able to say, I'm overwhelmed, I'm feeling vulnerable. I need to say what is really happening inside of my head, and that makes me really sad because I'm just thinking out all the other new vets that don't say it.

0:20:00.0 Steve Magness: Exactly, no, thanks for sharing that story because I think it's important to talk about it because... And the psychology is very clear on this, if we just keep ignoring, suppressing, restraining, it just comes back three or four fold greater, and that's what often happens is we get taught like, Oh, don't say I'm overwhelmed, don't acknowledge any of this stuff, and that's essentially saying, Don't acknowledge reality, because in very stressful professions like vet med, that's gonna be the case sometimes. And if you just deny it, you're essentially... Your brain is essentially looking out at the world and being like, What do you mean we're not stressed or overwhelmed, like I see you do it, going crazy, and our stress hormones are through the roof and all this stuff, Like, what?

0:20:53.2 Steve Magness: And that uncertainty and that not... Inability to make sense of the world it's occupying just leads to chaos, and I think that's why it's important to flip this script and talk about it and acknowledge it, and it's not a sign of weakness, it's just a sign of difficult situations and you know where my mind goes to this is actually when I was talking to a good friend who's in the military and going through special forces right now, he told me he was essentially like, "Steve, if I went into whatever, I got dropped in the woods and got told to survive," which is what happens with them in their training, "Do you think it's best if I just say, 'Oh man, this is a piece of cake, this is no problem.' I'm not gonna acknowledge the craziness... "

0:21:45.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that'll take care of it.

0:21:45.5 Steve Magness: Yeah, no. He's like, I have to acknowledge the reality that like, oh crap, I'm in this very difficult moment, like this is going to be stressful and like, okay, what do I need to do to get through this stress, don't just dismiss it. It's real. So I think the same is the case for the rest of us, it's like often we're taught, don't acknowledge it, don't dismiss it, but the only way we can get through things often is to acknowledge the reality of the situation and then figure out, Okay, how do I keep my head on straight and manage and get through this so that hopefully it'll be okay.

0:22:22.2 Katie Berlin: And that's a... It's an interesting comparison because on the one hand, I've never been dropped in the woods and have to survive, but on the other hand, being a brand new vet, especially I would imagine I didn't do an internship after school, but in veterinary medicine internships or optional, so you can go and do a year of a rotating internship and go through surgery and emergency and stuff like that, and usually the interns work a bazillion hours a week and they get paid nothing, and they're basically living at the clinic, and they're stuck on overnights a lot when they work the emergency shifts, and sometimes they're just alone, and so you might have these brand new grads that are thrown into the mix on an overnight with very little support, even though they know the least of any of the doctors in that hospital, and that terrified me, that probably was the main reason I didn't do an internship, even though you learn a lot that way, because I just couldn't see that being a situation where I would do well, and it's like a survive or quit kind of situation, is what it sounds like to me, at least for someone like me who's not an adrenaline junkie in any way, and I just wonder...

0:23:33.1 Katie Berlin: I think a lot of vets, I can't speak for technicians, but I would imagine the same thing for them. When you get out of school, you feel like you have to fake it till you make it 'cause you're worried if you don't project an air of confidence, even if you're feeling anything but, that people aren't gonna trust you and you're not gonna be able to grow and do your job, because people will just sort of steer clear of you, 'cause they'll think you're not confident. So how would you suggest navigating those feelings, when you're new and you're like, if I show my weakness I'm not gonna be able to do anything or learn.

0:24:08.7 Steve Magness: Yeah, that's... It's a tricky subject, and that's the tricky thing that a lot of people face, especially when you're new in a profession. I would say a couple of different things. First, I'm gonna quote a study that looked at entrepreneurs and investors and faking it versus not essentially. What they found is that the fake it till you make it would fool the investors to give them money, but only the lower level investors who weren't very good at their job. Okay, the people who had success and had higher rates of success in their investing job, the fake it till you make it didn't fool them. It didn't fool them and it didn't help the people who are faking it. The lesson I get from that, and I think it applies to others, is that faking it works on easy things or fools people who really don't know what they're doing. The people who have been in the trenches and who understand maybe the difficulty of the job, not always. But often understand that, yeah, this is a really difficult moment and you're not gonna have full confidence in yourself or in the spot, and I'm not asking you to.

0:25:25.3 Steve Magness: And that's just kind of real and how it is, so number one is keep that in mind. The second part of it is, I think it's lowering the bar when you're in these situations, because if you're just... If you're just out of school and you're just like interning, no one expects you to have

everything figured out, neither should you. What you should go back to is the things that you have gone through in class that you have been prepared for, that you have been mentored and taught on, those are the things you should develop confidence in.

0:26:02.6 Steve Magness: And like have confidence that you know what to do in these situations you've been trained on and go there, if you get presented with a new or different situation, which will inevitably happen, it's not that you should have confidence on like, Oh, I can solve everything, I'm just gonna act like I do, no, have confidence in the things that you're secure in, and then the things that you don't like be curious about and ask for help when you need it.

0:26:29.1 Katie Berlin: That's the big thing.

0:26:30.6 Steve Magness: Asking for help, isn't a sign... Don't think it is a sign of I don't know, approach it from a sign of curiosity of, "Hey, I need to learn how to do this because I wanna be the best I can at my job and acting like I know how to do it when I really don't, that means I'm never gonna learn the correct procedure, the correct standards or what have you, and if you have someone who's more experienced who has this knowledge, approach them and embrace it in that frame, and most of the time they're gonna come at you as like, Okay, this person wants to learn, wants to develop, wants to be the best vet med that they can, so I'm gonna mentor them and help them out.

0:27:11.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's a really good point. I was thinking, while you were saying that about bosses in this field, sort of more experienced veterinarians who think about when they were solo veterinarian in their first practice and they lived in the clinic, and people would come knocking at all hours, and there were no emergency clinics to take the pets to say you had to do it or the pet was gonna die. Okay, first of all, when there's no options, it's a little bit easier to tackle it because you know it's you or nothing, it's a little bit harder when you know that someone down the street could do it, 'cause they've done it a million times, and you're like, I have no idea what, how to even start here. And then they would muscle through that surgery in the middle of the night and everything worked out, you know, and I just think about how many of them probably did that and how few of them probably did it the right way, and I'm making quotes. Nobody knows how to do a surgery perfectly the first time with no supervision the right way, and that doesn't necessarily mean that that's what we should do now in our situations, and so...

0:28:29.3 Katie Berlin: There was another quote from the book I wanted to bring up, it was, "Toughness is having the space to make the right choice under discomfort." Okay, first of all, I love that idea, because decisions are power, I think when you're a doctor, especially, but a lot of us do that, like a lot of veterinarians and vet techs make decisions all day when we're uncomfortable, but they're for other people and animals. They're like What should I do with this pet? What should I say to this client? What medicine should I prescribe here? Should we go to surgery? Should I take another X-ray first? How do we turn that decision making on ourselves when we're so stuck in making decisions for other people?

0:29:15.8 Steve Magness: Oh man, that's a really good and difficult question to answer. I think you're right. So here's what I would say there, is that the reason that you're probably comfortable making decisions for other people, is that it's your job, and then B, there's just enough almost natural space that allows you to be that objective person to navigate that difficult moment because you are, A, the expert, but you're also thinking about it, How can I help this other person's dog, cat, whatever have you. It's almost like it's easier to give advice to a friend than it is to give ourselves

advice and follow it.

0:30:04.1 Katie Berlin: Oh my gosh, that's so true.

0:30:06.4 Steve Magness: Right. So when it comes to your own decisions on things that maybe aren't others, but your own choices, your own decisions, like what I would ask is, or what I would suggest is go to the place where you know how to make decisions, which is, Create some space and distance where you're almost imagining or thinking about, Okay, What would I tell a person if they walked into the store? What would I tell my neighbor, my friend on how to handle this situation? What you're doing is you're creating that space because you're taking it away from like this, "Hey, it's me and me alone," to, "Okay, how would I approach this?" The other thing that sounds a little bit weird, but research tells us actually works is when you're in that moment trying to make that decision for yourself, is change the way that how you talk to yourself. So often our inner dialogue is like, Okay, I could do this, or I can do this, or I should do this, and it's all kind of I, me-focused, which is very... Again, not much space there. We're thinking for ourselves, if we change that to second or third person, you could do this, or Katie or Steve could do that.

0:31:23.6 Steve Magness: Research clearly shows lots of great psychology research, particularly from Ethan Kross out of the University of Michigan, that shows that when we just change our simple self-talk, we create a little bit of that space and that distance. What happens there? It takes that emotional content that's associated with that difficult moment and it decreases it just enough so that instead of intertwined with our decision, it almost alleviates it just a little bit so we can have a little perspective and hopefully get to that right decision or that thoughtful decision more so than when it just feels like, Oh my gosh, it's just me making this choice and my emotions and are all intertwined and tied up with it.

0:32:12.6 Katie Berlin: I remember reading about that in the book about creating that distance, and I'm just picturing this could have become a thing, like when I was working in the clinic and I was working with a great team at my last job, and they knew me really well, but I can just picture me saying to them, Okay, so sometimes I might stop and say, "Should Katie, send this text message. Should Katie actually say that to the client," and then you can't think I'm nuts because I'm actually just trying to create space for me to make good decisions for myself. And I could see that becoming a thing. I really think that would be... You can almost make it a little bit fun if you're in a clinic environment and you're trying to make hard decisions for yourself. Like, should Katie take a break and have some lunch. I think Katie should do that. The answer is yes, the answer is Katie should always have lunch, otherwise Katie's gonna lose her job. But I love that, I love it. Okay, so can somebody be tough and a quitter?

0:33:14.9 Steve Magness: Absolutely, and the example I... So whenever we... It comes back to choices. So continuing to persist on in an activity is a choice, and what you're doing there is you're saying, "This thing means enough to me, and has enough importance where I'm going to choose to keep doing it." At the same time quitting is also a choice, and often we frame it as a negative on like, Oh gosh, you couldn't handle it, you're not tough enough, etcetera, but all it is, is saying, sometimes acknowledging that your priorities have changed, that this thing you're persisting on maybe isn't as important as you think, and maybe your time, attention is better spent over on this other thing over here, so you should quit, so you have the space to pursue it. And actually research shows us that in fact, those who score higher on different scales of toughness often are better at what is called goal shifting and goal re-engagement, which is what is goal-shifting except for

quitting one thing and then applying your effort to something else, and what we often see is that people who think maybe they're "tough", they stay too long in persistence mode.

0:34:47.3 Steve Magness: And miss out on opportunities that are there. But they're kind of doggedly pursuing them. And the story I like to tell that really centered this for me in my head is when I was talking to climbers who climb like mountains like Mount Everest and stuff, and they'd be like, "Steve, the easy decision is always to persist. Why? 'Cause you just spent the last year of your life training and preparing to make it to the summit, but the sometimes hard and smart and tough decision is to be like, 'Oh man, the summit is there. I could probably make it, but I don't have the energy to make it all the way back down, so this is probably risking my life,' so I should quit." even though the "goal" is right there. So I like to think of quitting in the same frame is that sometimes it's the wise, tough decision, and we shouldn't think negatively about it if it allows you to, you know, again, free yourself up to do what other things that might have more meaning or importance at this moment.

0:35:55.7 Katie Berlin: I hear a lot of veterinary professionals in social media groups talk about quitting and they say, "I have a ton of loans. A veterinary education is so expensive and we don't get paid enough to pay it back," and people can be in debt for their entire careers, and they'll feel trapped or they'll be in a situation where they have to live in a certain place and they're working at a clinic that they don't fit well with the culture or the management, and they feel stuck and they'll say, "I wish I could do anything else, but I don't know how to leave. This is who I always wanted to be." And I just think about how we could change that narrative. You were talked talking about control before and how when people don't have any control, they sort of become apathetic and then things take this downward spiral, and it's like, how do you get it back after that? And I was just wondering how much of that lack of control might play a role in all of those situations where people feel like they just wanna give it up and walk away.

0:37:02.5 Steve Magness: Absolutely, it's an unfortunate situation, but it is completely real and especially from a financial side as well is often like that barrier makes us feel like we have no choice, and the research shows as well, is that that tends to shift our motivation, so we start... We get in vet because we love it, we enjoy it, something tied it at us to it, like we say, Okay, this is something that I love to pursue, so it's very... An intrinsic internal motivation. But if we feel trapped, what happens is it almost pushes us to our basic kind of necessities, which pushes us more to that external motivation, which can be very helpful for surviving in short situations, but that external extrinsic motivation is... It's like lighter fluid, it's like a big fire, but it burns out quickly.

0:38:04.3 Steve Magness: It doesn't sustain over the long haul, so... Absolutely, I think that control issue is a big thing. So to me, another thing that I'd say as well is that the environment around us plays a big deal in whether we can be "tough" or not, we often think of it as this individual characteristic, but there's all sorts of research from sport to business to life that shows that if our environment provides us a place where we feel like we belong, where we feel like we can make progress and grow, and that we feel like we have that sense of control or autonomy, good things will happen if we take away all three of those things, like our motivation goes plummets, we're not gonna be able to handle challenging things, so to me it's... How do you try to set up your environment, and I get we don't have control over everything, but how do you set up your environment to fulfill those three basic things in the best way that you can, and even if that means on small things.

0:39:09.7 Steve Magness: I'm reminded of the Stanford neuro biologist who... On that middle part, that sense of progress and growth and competency, he said that often we try and get it from our workplace all the time, and that's fine, but sometimes our work won't provide that, so make sure you have that sense of competency somewhere in your life and the example he gave is, If your work isn't giving it, but you're the star on the company softball game at the picnic, well, that can give you a little bit of competency for a little bit to help you get through things, so look for those small moments where you can say, Hey, maybe I'm not making progress in the main thing, but I'm making progress over here, maybe I don't have belonging in my entire workplace, but I have these connections to maybe...

0:40:09.1 Steve Magness: The two or three people I work with the most, and I'm gonna try and create that belonging and cohesion, even if I don't have it in a the greater organization.

0:40:21.0 Katie Berlin: That's such good advice. And I think also ties back to what we're talking about early on, where you were talking about sort of the side of you that loves athletics and the side of you that is a nerd and loves to geek out about data, and I would say that a lot of us are like that too, we're very data-oriented science people, want evidence for things, and yet we're also very driven in the way that many athletes are very driven, and we're used to succeeding because you have to succeed a lot to get into vet school and to be a good vet or tech and succeed in those stressful environments, and so I sometimes wonder... I think a lot of us maybe sell ourselves a little short because we don't tackle outside pursuits with the same drive and passion that we tackle our careers with, and because we think we don't have time or we're too busy, or we don't wanna spend any money to do it. And yet, the gains that we will get from those other pursuits might help our careers become more sustainable in the long run, because that definitely happened with me.

0:41:29.1 Steve Magness: Yes, exactly. So what happens is, if your sense of meaning, purpose, progress, success is only in a narrow field, what are you doing, you're making yourself incredibly fragile, it's no different than the athlete who may be entire identity is tied around, do I win this race or not, well, if they don't win, they themselves, their sense of self is gonna be crushed, so instead, we need to have... And I get the time constraints and all that stuff, but even on small scale, we need to diversify our sources of meaning, purpose, progress, all of those things. And it can be something very simple. I'll give myself as an example, as a writer, it can be very stressful when a book comes out because you're like, Okay, I've spent the last three plus years working on this, and now over a couple of weeks, like whether people like it or not will determine whether...

0:42:34.8 Katie Berlin: I cannot imagine that.

0:42:35.3 Steve Magness: And it's not only... It's almost like auditioning for your job every couple of years because your ability to do the next book is dependent on how this one does. So if I lived in that space the whole time, I would drive myself nuts, so I have other things like helping runners, coaching, even my own pursuits of no matter what I'm doing, I'm going out for a run or exercising and feeling like, okay, even if the day goes bad, I still got my hour run in, and that's something, like that's something to feel good about.

0:43:13.7 Steve Magness: Having those is what I would say is, again, look for those small things that you can do consistently that bring a little bit more of that into your life, and that can go a long way for helping you deal with the kind of struggles of your workplace.

0:43:32.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah, you talked about something in the book called affective inertia, which basically then, from what I understand, you have a stressful event happen to you, but the stressful event kind of reverberates and eventually you're responding to those reverberations and not the event itself. And you said that when you have a sense of control in your environment, which many of us I think feel like we don't have a lot of control over what's happening, at least in a day-to-day... That clinic type of situation, when you don't have that control, then your alarm bells become more easily triggered, and so I could see this being like a compounding thing where you don't have a sense of control and your alarm bells are ready to go off all the time, and then when they go off, they reverb and you can't get over it and you're constantly just feeling those reverberations and thinking like, "My life is really hard and I don't know what to do, and I'm stuck here," that feels very familiar to me in a kind of a tender way.

0:44:37.3 Steve Magness: Yeah, exactly, and it's a very... Again, it feels familiar because it's part of the human condition, and I think that if you look at it, what happens often is we get stuck in these loops and whenever those reverbs happen, what we're doing is we're just reinforcing that stress and reinforcing that, Oh, this is something that I don't have control over, this is something that I should be stressful over, and we all experience this, right. All you have to do is think about that moment that maybe went wrong, where you said, oh, I maybe let someone down or made the wrong decision, or what have you, and then you spend the next... It pops up into your head for hours and days, and then you're about to go to sleep and that thought pops in your head and you feel the tension and stress on you.

0:45:31.8 Steve Magness: So that's why I think it's really important to figure out, Okay, for myself, what are my strategies and tools to be able to quiet that down, what is my process? To be able to say, "You know what? This negative thing happened. It does suck, I get it. I experienced the stress, but how do I process that and then be able to let it go for a bit," and again, there's no easy way to do it, but what the research and in psychology is clearly shows us is that avoiding it doesn't help.

0:46:06.5 Katie Berlin: No.

0:46:07.5 Steve Magness: So you've gotta deal with it and process it in your own way, and sometimes that's coming to terms with it, other times it's as simple as... One of the best ways we can deal with and process it is talking to a good friend or colleague about it, because then we get to almost offload a little bit of the problem where it's like, oh, we've dealt with it with someone else, they've helped us frame it, and then put it in the right perspective. I don't need to carry this baggage for the rest of the day or for days or weeks on end...

0:46:44.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah, especially when those feelings are shame, like you said, about letting someone down or making the wrong decision, which I lived in constant fear of for 12 years, and I didn't realize how much that had amped up my level of anxiety which was the fear of making the wrong call all the time. I wasn't even thinking about it, it was just there. And I think so many of us just live in that gray space of like, "Okay, today is gonna be the day where I could make the wrong decision," or especially if you've had a lawsuit or a board complaint, which if you practice long enough and sometimes if you practice for five minutes, you're gonna have that because it's unfortunately the world we live in, but so many of those are due to maybe a lack of communication about something that happens versus what actually happens as I figured out the hard way.

0:47:36.4 Steve Magness: No, exactly, and that story kinda reminds me of when I was talking to an

emergency room physician who deals with a lot of the same things that you guys kinda do because it's like, Are you making the right decision or not. And I think those situations, like you're always gonna have some carry over and all that stuff, but he outlined it pretty clear where he is like, "I know I'm gonna have this, so I just have to define my process and try and create at least a little bit of boundaries around this." So for him, it was afterwards, on a stressful day, I'm gonna talk to someone about it, and then on my drive home, I'm gonna think about it and I'm gonna try and process it and maybe I have a conversation on the phone, maybe it's just me, but the moment I walk in the door from that drive home, that's my signal, my sign that like, "Okay, I thought about it long enough, I'm gonna try and at least move on to the next thing to focus on," which is dinner or lunch or whatever it was, to create that natural barrier, which is like, Okay, it's time to move on to the next phase and let that one go a little bit.

0:48:47.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, yeah, that's so true and very difficult to do in some situations, but probably even more important in those situations, so before we go, I wanted to just touch on psychological safety for a minute, a huge topic, we're talking about it a lot now in veterinary medicine, which I really love. There's some really fantastic voices within vet med who are talking about psychological safety, but I think it's still may be a slightly unfamiliar term to a lot of people, so would you mind just giving your idea of what psychological safety means?

0:49:22.2 Steve Magness: Yeah, absolutely. So psychological safety is essentially the ability to voice your thoughts, and opinions, and all of that good stuff without an overwhelming fear of punishment, meaning you can express yourself, who you are, you're playing... I'll use the athletic analogy, you're playing out of a place of love and growth instead of fear and punishment. And in the workplace, what often happens is we create these environments that are more kind of like fear of failure, fear of making a mistake environments where if you express yourself in the wrong way or emit the wrong thing, then you're gonna kinda be punished or beaten down a little bit, and what psychological safety is all about is creating that environment where it's about growth and development, where you feel like you can express opinions, even if they run counter or express ideas that again, might run counter and not be in a place of fear or punishment.

0:50:33.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, and that is also ringing a lot of bells in my head about places I've worked where I had no psychological safety, and places where I felt like I could say I made a mistake, I don't know what to do, or I don't... I'm stuck in this situation, I have too much going on and I feel overwhelmed. I did not feel psychologically safe in that environment at the beginning when we talked about where I was overwhelmed and said so, and was basically told to keep that to myself, but I think the difference in those environments too was me in a big way, because I got to a point where I was gonna say it no matter where I was, or the consequences, because I had been supported maybe in my personal life enough, and so that brings the question, how much of this... How much of the toughness, as you define it in this book, is personal and something you can develop personally, and how much is dependent on your environment?

0:51:36.7 Steve Magness: You know, I wish I had the answer to that question.

0:51:41.1 Katie Berlin: Then you would never need to write another book.

0:51:44.5 Steve Magness: Exactly. Here's what I'll tell you. It depends on both, but both can improve... The environment is crucial. It allows you to be in a place where you can do these things. It supports that, it creates that foundation for things, so of course, try to craft the right

environment, but if you find yourself in the wrong environment and sometimes we're just stuck there, that doesn't mean you're doomed. The personal side also matters and the nice thing is the personal side has, whether you see yourself as tough or not, research data experience all shows that we can all get infinitely better, and I think that is the message maybe of hope is that... Look at both sides and look at well where is the room for growth in this... And often it's in both places, but sometimes we feel a little trapped in one or the other, well, that means developing it in this other situation until maybe your environment or whatever changes... The other thing that I'd say as well is that our environment doesn't just mean in the workplace, as you illustrated there, if you feel kind of trapped in your workplace, well develop something outside of that, your friends, support group, your family support group.

0:53:02.9 Steve Magness: Those who you can lean on and have your back and have your so... And have your back no matter what. Because that's gonna make you a little bit more secure. Even if you enter an environment that is not safe, that is very threatening, that is very fear, fear or whatever based, if you have that outside of your world, then you're going to be able to handle and tackle it better, so I think the takeaway... The message is, it's a little bit of everything, but the great thing is that all of it is improvable, and all of it, you can have an impact on if you take the time to do so.

0:53:44.3 Katie Berlin: That is a message of hope and really important. And I should just say from personal experience, your community can be online too, like if you have a supportive online community, they could be there for you even if you aren't fortunate enough to have a lot of friends and family that you can depend on, at least in person nearby, because the uncharted community really supported me when I was having a tough time, and AAHA has its own community now, and so you can connect with people that way where maybe you wouldn't be able to do that in person, or if you're introverted and just don't you're not like a joiner, you don't have to be joining a volleyball club on all the weekends to have to have people you can lean on. So that's an important thing I've discovered for sure. But you have to kinda put yourself out there a little bit. Either way. And it's so worth it. So last question, we on this podcast, like to think a lot about different members of the veterinary team because we have veterinarians, we have veterinary technicians and assistants, and then we have client care representatives, and everybody feels like they have a slightly different level of control in their environment, and I would say having worked in pretty much all those positions, I felt very little control when I worked, say, behind a reception desk at a vet clinic.

0:55:06.8 Katie Berlin: And I was just wondering, in your opinion, how much of the psychological safety in a workplace depends on leadership, and can people lead from within, if it doesn't feel like that's the culture where they are right now?

0:55:22.5 Steve Magness: So again, the nuanced answer is that leadership often comes from the top, but it can also come from the middle or bottom up. So you can have an influence, if you have horrible leadership, are you gonna change it as the receptionist? No, then you can still shift and change things... I think there it is, it's a little tricky and difficult, and I don't have any great answers for you, but one of the things I remember a former NFL general manager who actually taught a class that I was in in grad school, I always communicated, this is... He said, Make sure that people have a role and that they feel like they are contributing no matter what they were doing. So he always told me, and this might be a top-down leadership thing, but I think it's a really important message is he said, the Super Bowl winning team, the time we won the Super Bowl, everybody in that building felt like they were contributing to that win, even the receptionist, and he said often, it was my job to make sure that the kind of guys who were just barely on the team and never gone into

the game understood their role and understood how it was vital and that they were serving like a vital role in practice to prepare maybe the starters who got out and got the limelight, but they wouldn't be prepared without those guys who were there in practice and never saw it in the game.

0:57:00.4 Steve Magness: So maybe that's a message if you're in some leadership role is, well, how is everybody on your team serving an important role, and how can you create that environment where they know and understand it, because the reality in a vet world is like, yes, you might be the receptionist, but you play the central communication role between the clinic and the people who are needing help and providing service.

0:57:27.9 Steve Magness: And if you don't serve that role, like the clinic isn't gonna succeed, and then the environment, the inviting environment of the people coming into it won't be there, so every single purpose from the top to the bottom serves a vital piece, and I think it's on the leadership to outline that, emphasize it and create that culture where everyone understands that.

0:57:55.6 Katie Berlin: For sure. And this is something that people who maybe don't see themselves as leaders but might have a different role in the practice can acknowledge the role that others play, even if the top top leadership isn't doing it, so you're an associate veterinarian, you see your appointments, but you don't necessarily make the culture what it is, but you can contribute by understanding and acknowledging out loud the role that everybody in the practice plays towards a successful day.

0:58:26.3 Steve Magness: Exactly, and if I might add one more thing that came into my mind is several years ago, there was this wonderful study that looked at cadets in the Naval Academy, and they wanted to see when you joined the Naval Academy, you're essentially stuck in squadrons for the next four years until you graduate. And they wanted to see what made a good squadron, what were the squadrons that improved on all these athletic and academic measures that they track every year. And their assumption going into this study was, Oh, it'll be the captain, the leader of the squadron the best performer, but what they found is it was actually the opposite, the least like the worst performer in the squadron determined how everybody else improved, meaning if the lowest performer coming in improved a lot, everybody else improved a lot, and the reason for that is they... Again, speculated is that you looked at the lowest performing performer and everybody, everybody knew like, hey, they were the slowest or maybe not as strong as everybody else, but if you looked over there and you saw that person working hard, you thought, "Oh, okay, well, I'm better than them in terms of performance, so I better at least be working as hard, if not harder than them," so it kind of went up the chain, and I think that, again, was a wonderful example of like...

0:59:56.3 Steve Magness: Even if we might feel like, oh, we're down on the totem pole, often, we can push that culture up by the effort that we're giving, which then resonates and carries throughout the rest of the team.

1:00:11.7 Katie Berlin: That is so true, and I've seen it myself, and that is a spectacular way to close because I don't think there's any better kind of mic drop than that, which is, we can lift each other up just by caring and working really hard at our jobs, whatever they may be, and it's definitely true within a vet clinic. So, Steve, thank you so much for all this time. Where can people reach you? I know there are gonna be people who want to learn more about you and hear more from you, as well as checking out the book, of course, we'll share a link in the show notes. But where can they find you online?

1:00:47.9 Steve Magness: Yeah, so on any social media, it's @SteveMagness, and then you can check out all my work on my website, www.stevemagness.com.

1:01:00.6 Katie Berlin: And I'm a fan of the growth equation podcast, so people should definitely check that out too. If they wanna hear more from you, here's the book. I'm a bookmark person. This is why we've gone for an hour because I didn't even come close to asking you all the questions that I could have asked you, but I really appreciate it, this has been so much fun, and I know people will... You'll give people a lot to think about, and I'm very curious to hear your thoughts, people who are listening and watching, so please email me at podcast@aaha.org and let me know what you think. And if you've checked out the book, I'd love to hear what you think about that too. And thank you so much for joining us.

1:01:39.1 Steve Magness: Thanks a lot.