

Mind/Body Wellness Medicine for Veterinarians © and Applications in Clinical Practice

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Key Ideas

Mind-Body Medicine, Career Transitions, Stress Management, Personal Growth, Relaxation Response, Creative Dialogue, Insights for 21st Century One Health Veterinary Practices

Introduction

The practice of Veterinary Medicine offers a unique and extremely rewarding professional life. It also offers many challenges that can create stress and impact on ones mental, physical and emotional health. Mind Body Medicine (MBM) is an essential approach to dealing with the stress of being a health care professional in this time. It is being integrated into conventional human medicine in numerous hospitals and medical centers. It is beneficial for veterinarians to now integrate mind body medicine into their veterinary practices in order to be of benefit to their practice, themselves, their family, staff, clients and patients.

This one day workshop will review the scientific basis of mind body medicine and how you can use it to be of benefit for yourself, your veterinary practice, your staff, clients and patients. Integration of these beneficial techniques into your veterinary practice and daily life may be one of the most important shifts that you can make in your veterinary life. They will influence every thought, decision and action you make each day. The latest neuroscience continues to document the beneficial changes in our brain function and chemistry when we integrate these techniques.

Once one understands the neurochemical implications of stress on yourself and others and how you can change and manage that in your life, both your practice life and personal life can improve. Solutions, exercises and training based on the Relaxation Response as defined by the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School will be reviewed.

The concept of compassion fatigue and “burn-out” within the profession has been discussed much more openly and frequently during this past decade. There are numerous articles published regularly now on stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue in both the human medical and veterinary professions. The challenges, concepts and healthy mind body medical, wellness approaches to these conditions will be discussed. Techniques of mind/body medicine offer veterinarians’ opportunities to reflect on, rejuvenate and re-create our careers and lifestyles.

This workshop will be a combination of lectures and experiential exercises that you can integrate into your veterinary practice and life immediately. These are time-tested and scientifically documented processes that help balance our brain chemistry, physical and emotional health and bring greater joy and satisfaction back into our lives.

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Scientific Basis of Mind Body Medicine (MBM) Part 1 & 2 **Current Challenges and Stressors**

The practice of Veterinary Medicine offers a unique and extremely rewarding professional life. Veterinarians have many gifts to offer others. We bring knowledge and compassion into a healing profession that cares for the helpless. The profession also offers many challenges that can create stress and impact on ones mental, physical and emotional health. The challenges of practicing progressive medicine, staff management, practice management, client relations, and balancing these with other parts of our lives can become overwhelming at times. The experience of “burnout” is a major risk factor for veterinarians involved in the demanding area of patient care. Substance abuse, crisis management and suicide appear to be on the rise as well. Many veterinary associations now offer substance abuse and suicide prevention support. Research in the UK has shown that veterinarians have a suicide rate around four times higher than the general population. Veterinarians reported a higher level of anxiety and depressive symptoms than a non-clinical normative in the UK population (1). Veterinarians self-reported stress 46 percent of the time in the UK and 36 per cent in New Zealand (2). A variety of reasons have been proposed for the increased risk of suicide in veterinarians including:

1. Easy access to drugs and knowledge and means
2. Attitudes towards death and euthanasia suicide contagion
3. Cognitive and personality factors
4. Work-related stressors
5. Complaints at work
6. Perceived stigma of seeking help for a mental health problem and stoicism high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (1)

In addition, chronic long term stress leads to depressed mental states and other physical health changes related suppression of the immune system and subsequent disease. Chronic stress impacts on the hypothalamic pituitary axis impacting on numerous neurochemicals and hormones including norepinephrine, cortisol, serotonin, dopamine, endorphins etc. Chronic stress can lead to insulin resistance, systemic inflammation, hypertension, visceral adiposity and adverse cardiovascular responses. Chronic stress actually can cause remodeling of the hippocampus and amygdala. (3)

I might add that in the U.S. numerous veterinarians as well as human physicians feel that the increased litigious nature of society and malpractice liability has increased the levels of anxiety and depression. In addition, the recent economic downturn along with increased expenses appears to have increased stress levels throughout many health care professions. These challenges are not limited to the veterinary profession, but are seen in many healing professions. There is increased discussion regarding “compassion fatigue” in many health professions as well.

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Burnout is often the undesired end-point of a career that began with the noblest of intentions. Burnout sufferers begin to feel cynical, depressed, alienated, and negative about their role as a veterinarian. Some veterinarians choose to leave the profession or explore alternative career pathways within the profession. One source of burnout may lie within the personality of the individual who may feel overly responsible for the welfare of others and use unrealistically high measures of personal performance in evaluating themselves (4). When caregivers suffer disappointments in patient care, they may become emotionally depleted, lose touch with themselves and others, second guess themselves and eventually sink into professional despair. Developing a way to prevent compassion fatigue is a necessary component of professional development according to Chaplain S. Bryant Kendrick, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine and Gerontology at The Bowman Gray School of Medicine (4). One other perspective on burnout is that it may correlate with professional stagnation as well. Continuing education and training are key to maintain a stimulating career.

Mind Body Medicine and Health Care

This session will focus on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, Compassion Fatigue and various beneficial approaches. There has been a great deal of dialogue on the impact of chronic stress and compassion fatigue in various medical fields including veterinary medicine. Simple scientific techniques that can be incorporated into your daily life based on research from Harvard Medical School and other research centers will be explained and demonstrated.

Mind/Body Medicine is a rapidly expanding field in human medicine and its applications for veterinarians are just beginning to be explored. In its simplest definition, Mind/Body medicine is the use of our mental activity, thoughts and feelings to help prevent and treat various “dis-eases”. Studies in mind/body medicine document the effects of thoughts on the release of various neurotransmitters and neurohormones and the impact that has on our physical, mental and emotional health. Many ancient traditions discuss the essential nature of our mind and its impact on our health. What we think directly impacts on our overall health. One key teaching in Buddhism is on training the mind and cultivating loving-kindness. In “The Art of Happiness, A Handbook for Living”, the Dalai Lama states “The systematic training of the mind—the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states—is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain (5).

The Mind and Life Institute has held numerous conferences and published numerous books on the health benefits of various mind exercises and meditation. These valuable resources can be found at the website: www.MindandLife.org.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn has developed a program called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) that has been integrated into many hospitals and medical centers. Dr. Richard Davidson from the University of Wisconsin Neuroscience laboratory has documented the benefits of meditation through functional MRI's. Many of their findings on the healing power of Meditation are discussed with the Dalai Lama in “The Mind’s Own Physician (6).

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One essential mind/body exercise to practice in order to manage the challenges of our career is what Dr. Herbert Benson of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School calls “The Relaxation Response”. (7) There are two basic steps necessary to elicit The Relaxation Response. The first is the repetition of a word, sound, prayer, thought, phrase or muscular activity. The second step is the passive return to the repetition when other thoughts intrude. The Relaxation Response has been found to decrease respiratory rate, heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen consumption. It has been demonstrated to be effective in the treatment of anxiety, hostility, depression, hypertension, insomnia, chronic pain, premenstrual syndrome, infertility and stress. Other stress reducing exercises will be taught as well.

Dr. Richard Davidson at the U. of Wisconsin Neuroscience Laboratory is investigating and documenting the cutting edge of the neuroscience of contemplative practice on the brain. He has demonstrated significant benefit to students who had no experience in meditation. He found that simply doing 10 minutes a day of meditation for two weeks showed demonstrable and beneficial changes in the brain through functional MRI's. A discussion of these findings can be found through the website www.soundstrue.com under their free seminar on the compassionate brain. In addition, there are video's of Dr. Davidson discussing his research available at these links.....Video of Dr. Davidson's lecture "Implications of Scientific Research on Meditation for Spiritual Care" at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. 2007 and Video of Dr. Davidson's lecture "Cultivating compassion: Neuroscientific and behavioral approaches".

He has also found that mindfulness practice behavioral interventions were able to reduce emotional reactivity and be of therapeutic benefit in chronic inflammatory conditions (8). Numerous studies are now documenting the health benefits of mbsr. One study documented the beneficial effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction (mbsr) on medical and premedical students. The paper that that the “ability to cope successfully with the enormous stress of medical education may lead to a cascade of consequences at both a personal and professional level” (9) They found that participation in mbsr effectively (1) reduced self-reported state and trait anxiety, (2) reduced overall psychological distress including depression, and (3) increased empathy levels (8). I feel that veterinary students and veterinarians can relate to all of these. The stress of veterinary school only seems to increase upon graduation when one learns to work with difficult clients, staff, school loans and integration of a reasonable work/life balance.

Shapiro et al. also state that “the literature is replete with evidence that the stress inherent in health care negatively impacts health care professionals, leading to increased depression, decreased job satisfaction, and psychological distress” (10). More articles are appearing in veterinary journals also acknowledging the toll that chronic stress is taking on veterinarians. Shapiro et al. examined the effects of a short-term stress management program, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), on health care professionals. Their results from this prospective randomized controlled pilot study suggest that an 8-week MBSR intervention may be effective for reducing stress and increasing quality of life and self-compassion in health care professionals (10). A google search shows numerous studies documenting these benefits (10,11,12,13,14,15). Davidson has documented how meditation impacts on neuroplasticity (11). They also have found that Compassion training alters altruism and neural responses to suffering (13).

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In Dr. Davidson's new book, "*The emotional life of your brain: How its unique patterns affect the way you think, feel, and live -- and how you can change them*", the neuroscientist describes various mental exercises that you can to change your brain and how you feel and live (15). This is another approach that can be easily integrated both into veterinary school curriculum as well as into continuing education programs.

Further details and an extensive review of the effects of our thoughts on brain mechanisms and neurochemistry are described by Dr. James Austin, Professor Emeritus of Neurology at the University of Colorado, in his comprehensive text "Zen and the Brain" (16). Dr. Davidson and The University of Wisconsin have actually established The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (CIHM). CIHM conducts rigorous interdisciplinary research on healthy qualities of mind such as kindness, compassion, forgiveness and mindfulness which can be viewed at this website: <http://www.investigatinghealthyminds.org/cihm>.

The behavioral traits of kindness, compassion and forgiveness are often what have driven individuals to become veterinarians. Yet, for some veterinarians, somewhere along our journey, these traits have succumbed to the challenges and stresses of our veterinary profession. By integrating and practicing techniques to maintain a healthy mind, we can nourish those qualities within us again. The goal of CIHM is to create a world in which healthy qualities of mind are investigated and valued. My vision is to integrate these into an integrative approach to veterinary medicine.

Meditation and Mindfulness based stress reduction techniques (MBSR) are being integrated into numerous health care professions as well as major corporations. For example, mindfulness based meditation has been integrated into Google's courses for their employees. One of Google's first computer engineers and now their current Human Resource director, Chade-Meng Tan developed a course and book titled "Search Inside Yourself, the Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness and World Peace" (17). The key is mindfulness meditation. This book offers simple techniques that anyone can easily integrate into their lives. It is one of the most popular courses for google employees. If it is beneficial for google, I believe these simple techniques can be easily integrated into veterinary training programs as well. They can assist in making veterinary students and veterinarians calmer, more thoughtful, less stressed and thereby be of more benefit to our patients, clients and staff. Exercises from this book will be introduced throughout this workshop.

The key to rekindling the gift that we as veterinarians brought into this profession is in our thoughts and our mind. Dr. Joel Robertson, a psychopharmacologist, describes the impact of various neurotransmitters such as acetylcholine, norepinephrine, epinephrine, serotonin and others on our moods and performance. Through neurochemical evaluations, he offers simple approaches to maximizing our brain efficiency through nutrition, exercise and mental attitudes (18). By balancing our neurochemistry, we can enhance performance and prevent burnout. These nutritional, exercise and mental approaches will also be discussed.

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Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and meditation techniques will be an integral part of preventive veterinary medicine based on the One Health concept. One of the keys to quality veterinary medicine is the mental health and inner peace of the veterinarian and their staff. Mind Body medicine is one of the keys to a healthy mind and body. This will be recognized more and more in the next decade.

Throughout over thirty five years of clinical experience in veterinary practice, including emergency medicine, creating and managing a number of multi-veterinarian companion and equine practices, referral practices and being a professor at various veterinary schools and teaching at numerous conferences, I have found certain techniques that have been beneficial in relationships with staff, colleagues, clients and animals.

Throughout this one day workshop guided experiential practices with various MBM techniques will be taught. The integration of MBM into relationships with staff, colleagues, clients and animals will be discussed. The practical application and integration of these techniques into your daily veterinary practice will be discussed.

Personal Burnout Prevention Plan

Chaplain Kendrick recommends developing a personal burnout prevention plan based on the effects that your thoughts have on your actions. It is based on realistic expectations, the ability to differentiate subjective from objective components of reality, appropriate self-love and support from others. Kendrick feels that this stewardship program “facilitates self-preservation and renewal so that you can adapt to the stresses of the modern health care environment without losing the capability of being there for others”(4). Often times we waste energy experiencing frustrations based on expectations that exceed what is really possible. We also tend to not experience the moment, always reflecting on the past or worrying about the future. Often there is a tendency to confuse stress with fear, fear of the past, fear of the future. To assist with this, Chaplain Kendrick also suggests simple mindfulness techniques that assist in regaining the ability to be in the present moment. Too frequently we also fall into the trap of basing our self-worth on someone else’s opinion of our professional performance, creating a performance based self-esteem system. We need to differentiate who we truly are from what we do.

Exercises and creative dialogues will assist us in reflecting on where we began our journey as veterinarians to where we have ended up at this particular point in our career. Twelve approaches to creating a life and career that works better for us will be reviewed. Many of these approaches are based on mind training and mbsr techniques. These include the openness to change, self-responsibility, feeling our feelings, accepting what is, establishing appropriate boundaries, transforming our self-talk, loving ourselves, exploring the power of choice, commitment, surrender, standing in our truth and re-experiencing joy (19).

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Another approach to mind body medicine focuses on sound healing and the latest research on the effects of sound on brain function (20, 21). Different binaural sound frequencies have been found to quiet the brain, stimulate alpha, beta and theta waves, decrease stress and increase sense of well-being. These sound healing techniques can be very beneficial in decreasing stress at the end of the day. Various sound frequencies and music have also been found to be of benefit to dogs. Veterinary neurologist, Dr. Susan Wagner, authored a book, “Through a Dog’s Ear” (22), on how sound can improve the health and behavior of dogs and created a cd of classical music that has been clinically demonstrated to soothe a dog’s nervous system (23).

Recent research on the need for quiet, contemplative time in a busy schedule and life and the implications are updated in the Book “Quiet, The Power of Introverts in a World That Cannot Stop Talking” (24).

In the final session, the integration of MBM into the bigger picture and the future of veterinary practice and One Medicine Theory will be discussed. In a new documentary, “The Living Matrix, New Insights into Our Bodies, Mind and Health, various scientists and holistic practitioners explain a new perspective on healing based on an intricate web of factors that determine our well-being based on quantum physics of the human energy field, heart coherence and informational healthcare (25).

In the epilogue of “Search Inside Yourself” Tan humorously shares on how we can save the world in our free time based on our thoughts and our mind (17). Loving kindness and compassion are essential to creating a happier, more peaceful world. We as veterinarians can play a major role in reintegrating compassion into the world, person by person, animal by animal, clinic by clinic, hospital by hospital, community by community. In a recent conference on creativity and compassion I was asked how I integrated creativity and compassion into my veterinary career. I shared on how I found some of these techniques beneficial in my interactions with patients and clients in a chapter “A Quiet Space with Animals” in the book “Creativity and Compassion” (26). As an extension of this conference, The Dalai Lama answered questions from honor students at the university regarding what they could do to help the challenging state of the world. He continued to repeat that one of the most important things one can do is developing our own inner peace, compassion and aspiration to be of benefit to all beings. Both the Dalai Lama and Tan reiterate that when inner peace, compassion and aspiration are all strong within each of us, strong compassionate action comes naturally and organically and thereby it is sustainable. One of my passions throughout my veterinary career has been asking myself the question “What is ultimate healing”? That question stimulated my veterinary journey from its foundational basis in conventional medicine, surgery and animal behavior to exploring complementary approaches such as acupuncture, ethnobotanical medicine, chiropractic and other manual therapies, nutrition and nutritional supplements, homeopathy, and the human animal bond.

I realized that all these therapies together offered a comprehensive integrative approach to animal health care. I also realized that another key to ultimate healing is that we as veterinarians develop loving kindness and compassion for ourselves, our staff, our families, colleagues, clients and patients.

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We as veterinarians are in a unique position as caretakers of animal companions that inherently assist in opening the hearts of our clients. I propose that veterinary medicine may be a much broader field than we ever imagined. Perhaps veterinary medicine can be even more expansive and that each animal care location can be a place for expanding compassion in each and every community and thereby be a vehicle for making the world a happier and healthier place. We have the ability to be of so much more benefit to the world by being and expressing loving kindness and compassion in every thought and action we take. This is how the integration of mind body medicine into our veterinary practices and lives can be of immense benefit to the entire world.

The future of veterinary practice continues to evolve. Stress appears to continue to increase in our practices as well as throughout the world. A new world view of how veterinary medical practice can be of benefit to all beings in our community and society based on the integration of mind body medicine will be discussed. A new concept of how veterinary practices can become centers of compassion in society and be of practical benefit to all, will be shared. Through these various experiential processes we can begin to manage our challenging profession better, re-create our heart's desires and create a career and life style where we will enjoy each moment and each day to its fullest. We will then be able to be of the most service and benefit possible to all beings, two-legged, four-legged and winged.

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