

SARA WHITE: >> Hi, I'm Dr. Sara White.

SARA WHITE: I want to talk about coping with

SARA WHITE: complications and patient deaths.

SARA WHITE: I'm a spay/neuter veterinarian,

SARA WHITE: and I also like to do research

SARA WHITE: on spay/neuter practice and spay/neuter vets.

SARA WHITE: When I do research, my goal is to find answers

SARA WHITE: to things that I need to know,

SARA WHITE: to do my work the best that I can.

SARA WHITE: One question that would come up for me

SARA WHITE: anytime I had a patient death or a patient with

SARA WHITE: a serious complication was,

SARA WHITE: how do other vets deal with this?

SARA WHITE: How do they go to work the next day

SARA WHITE: knowing that they risk having

SARA WHITE: the very same complication all

SARA WHITE: over again in a new patient?

SARA WHITE: We know that mortality rates in

SARA WHITE: spay/neuter practice are as

SARA WHITE: low or lower than in private practice.

SARA WHITE: But the high volume of patients seen by

SARA WHITE: spay/neuter clinics means that even in

SARA WHITE: practices with really low mortality rates

SARA WHITE: and complication rates,

SARA WHITE: there will be some deaths

SARA WHITE: and serious complications.

SARA WHITE: Any vet working in one of

SARA WHITE: these practices or anywhere else

SARA WHITE: is going to need to

SARA WHITE: learn how to cope with their responses to

SARA WHITE: these events if they're going to

SARA WHITE: provide great patient care,

SARA WHITE: and stay happy and productive in their job.

SARA WHITE: I designed a study to ask veterinarians about this.

SARA WHITE: My research question was,

SARA WHITE: what are the experiences, thoughts,

SARA WHITE: and reactions of shelter and

SARA WHITE: spay/neuter veterinarians as they cope

SARA WHITE: with serious adverse patient events,

SARA WHITE: meaning life-threatening complications or

SARA WHITE: death related to spay/neuter.

SARA WHITE: I put together an online survey

SARA WHITE: with free-response essay questions,

SARA WHITE: and use qualitative thematic analysis

SARA WHITE: to look at the answers.

SARA WHITE: I got responses from 32 vets who had

SARA WHITE: worked in spay/neuter for a median of

SARA WHITE: eight years and who had been out of

SARA WHITE: vet school for a median of 17 years.

SARA WHITE: When I looked at the veterinarians' responses,

SARA WHITE: their experiences after serious event

SARA WHITE: fell into some pretty consistent phases.

SARA WHITE: They experienced immediate visceral reactions

SARA WHITE: to adverse events.

SARA WHITE: This was a flight or fight response,
SARA WHITE: and was an intense autonomic reaction.
SARA WHITE: These reactions evolved over time into
SARA WHITE: long-term resilience, or they were
SARA WHITE: experienced as recurrent trauma.
SARA WHITE: There were four factors that seem to shape
SARA WHITE: this long-term outcome in
SARA WHITE: each individual: Technical learning,
SARA WHITE: perspective and appraisal, support and
SARA WHITE: collegiality, and emotional learning.
SARA WHITE: How do vets describe their
SARA WHITE: immediate visceral reactions?
SARA WHITE: First, fight or flight.
SARA WHITE: "In the moment, it is horrible,
SARA WHITE: and I'm scared for both the
SARA WHITE: animal and for the owner.
SARA WHITE: Feels like hot lava coursing through my body.
SARA WHITE: Generally, don't sleep at night,
SARA WHITE: wake up anxious.
SARA WHITE: A lot of vets feel the need
SARA WHITE: to manage their reactions,
SARA WHITE: and continue to perform at work."
SARA WHITE: Right, when the event occurs or is noted,
SARA WHITE: I feel like I was hit by a truck.
SARA WHITE: But being the veterinarian,
SARA WHITE: I have to keep it together,
SARA WHITE: and move forward in a logical,

SARA WHITE: and productive manner.

SARA WHITE: Inside, my stomach is in my throat,

SARA WHITE: and I want to flee the situation.

SARA WHITE: I typically go home after these types of

SARA WHITE: experiences and cry and talk to my husband."

SARA WHITE: A lot of vets described empathy for other staff

SARA WHITE: and for the pet owners.

SARA WHITE: I would say that I feel more

SARA WHITE: profound emotions when there's an owner

SARA WHITE: involved who's emotionally bonded to the animal.

SARA WHITE: I'm sensitive to that bond as I can empathize.

SARA WHITE: It makes me feel even worse because

SARA WHITE: instead of feeling bad for the animal alone,

SARA WHITE: I'm now feeling bad

SARA WHITE: for the animal's family as well.

SARA WHITE: It doesn't change the value

SARA WHITE: of the animal's life to me.

SARA WHITE: After these initial reactions,

SARA WHITE: what happens next depends

SARA WHITE: on the four factors that help

SARA WHITE: veterinarians cope with

SARA WHITE: adverse events and be resilient.

SARA WHITE: First, being able to learn from what happened

SARA WHITE: is an important part of moving past the event.

SARA WHITE: If I can learn why something happened,

SARA WHITE: and what to do different next time,

SARA WHITE: then I think I'm more confident at dealing

SARA WHITE: with a similar problem the next time.

SARA WHITE: There's always something

SARA WHITE: to learn from these mistakes,

SARA WHITE: and that's the most important lesson

SARA WHITE: I walk away with.

SARA WHITE: [NOISE] Knowing I'm now wiser,

SARA WHITE: and will be more cautious in

SARA WHITE: these circumstances helps me

SARA WHITE: deal with any feelings of guilt.

SARA WHITE: Not being able to learn from the event or

SARA WHITE: failing to know how to avoid it in the future,

SARA WHITE: is an important source of anxiety for some,

SARA WHITE: and may contribute to experiencing

SARA WHITE: the event has traumatic.

SARA WHITE: I typically review procedures and

SARA WHITE: protocols after an adverse event,

SARA WHITE: and make modifications if one or more areas

SARA WHITE: are identified as possible sources of concern.

SARA WHITE: The most frustrating thing is not knowing what

SARA WHITE: went wrong to be able to make changes.

SARA WHITE: The second factor the veterinarians use to

SARA WHITE: cope with complications

SARA WHITE: is to put them into perspective.

SARA WHITE: Veterinarians use a variety of frames of

SARA WHITE: reference to put the loss

SARA WHITE: in some larger context.

SARA WHITE: In some cases, this is

SARA WHITE: the larger context of the

SARA WHITE: spay/neuter program itself.

SARA WHITE: I try to remember the thousands of animals who

SARA WHITE: benefited from my serving as their veterinarian,

SARA WHITE: even if only briefly via a spay/neuter program.

SARA WHITE: In other cases, vets used

SARA WHITE: their religious beliefs to

SARA WHITE: provide context and reassurance,

SARA WHITE: or made an effort to remember that their life and

SARA WHITE: identity is bigger than their work as a vet.

SARA WHITE: The third factor is support and collegiality.

SARA WHITE: Many vets find talking with

SARA WHITE: colleagues to be extremely helpful.

SARA WHITE: For me, I think I have to talk

SARA WHITE: with another veterinarian.

SARA WHITE: We are ultimately responsible for these lives.

SARA WHITE: Losing an animal is one thing,

SARA WHITE: but being the responsible, trusted person

SARA WHITE: and losing that animal adds another level.

SARA WHITE: Unless one has that responsibility,

SARA WHITE: they don't know how bad it

SARA WHITE: is on more than just one level.

SARA WHITE: Conversely, poor support from management

SARA WHITE: and colleagues may

SARA WHITE: stifle communication and learning.

SARA WHITE: Very little support from management.

SARA WHITE: Moderate from most colleagues.

SARA WHITE: One, in particular,

SARA WHITE: is very blaming and negative,

SARA WHITE: and she's really hard to be around,

SARA WHITE: and be vulnerable.

SARA WHITE: When she's around, not much sharing

SARA WHITE: and discussing goes on.

SARA WHITE: For some vets, feelings of

SARA WHITE: shame and guilt may affect their willingness to

SARA WHITE: communicate with others or may shape

SARA WHITE: which aspects of adverse events

SARA WHITE: they're willing to discuss.

SARA WHITE: Usually, I don't talk about

SARA WHITE: the technical issues if I feel I was at

SARA WHITE: fault because then I don't want to think

SARA WHITE: about or even bring it up; it's too painful.

SARA WHITE: Or I only discuss the technical issues.

SARA WHITE: I always feel the emotional part as

SARA WHITE: my own personal problem

SARA WHITE: for me to deal with myself.

SARA WHITE: The fourth factor that helps veterinarians cope

SARA WHITE: with adverse events is emotional learning.

SARA WHITE: With experience, some vets learn how to handle,

SARA WHITE: and support themselves through an adverse event.

SARA WHITE: They learn what to expect,

SARA WHITE: what they typically experience,

SARA WHITE: and the timescale for that experience.

SARA WHITE: I remember all the adverse events I've ever had,

SARA WHITE: but the painful feelings,

SARA WHITE: repetitive thoughts about the event,

SARA WHITE: visualizations, guilt,

SARA WHITE: sadness, which used to take months to disappear,

SARA WHITE: now only last a few days where they're intense.

SARA WHITE: Sometimes this emotional learning is a conscious,

SARA WHITE: deliberate skill acquisition process.

SARA WHITE: Accepting what is, a skill I've learned through

SARA WHITE: mindfulness meditation

SARA WHITE: has helped me tremendously.

SARA WHITE: I'm able to keep from wishing

SARA WHITE: the outcome had been different,

SARA WHITE: forgive myself if I made any mistakes,

SARA WHITE: and keep from ruminating on the event.

SARA WHITE: In addition, having a whole set of

SARA WHITE: self-care skills that keep me resilient.

SARA WHITE: For many, this learning is an ongoing process.

SARA WHITE: For some, it takes a balance of confidence,

SARA WHITE: and humility to face

SARA WHITE: the relentless possibility of not knowing,

SARA WHITE: or of doing harm while trying to do good.

SARA WHITE: This veterinarian has learned to anticipate and

SARA WHITE: manage her emotions in the face of uncertainty.

SARA WHITE: The harder feeling to deal with is the change to

SARA WHITE: feelings of self-doubt that comes next.

SARA WHITE: To me, that's the hardest thing to

SARA WHITE: deal with in spay/neuter,

SARA WHITE: especially if doing a lot of large animals,

SARA WHITE: in-heats, pregnant, debilitated, etc.

SARA WHITE: It never goes away.

SARA WHITE: You just learn to manage it.

SARA WHITE: Because no matter how well you do your job,

SARA WHITE: eventually, something unexpected will happen,

SARA WHITE: and no matter how well you try to be competent,

SARA WHITE: you will eventually face something you've

SARA WHITE: never seen or dealt with before.

SARA WHITE: However, for some veterinarians,

SARA WHITE: this balance was impossible,

SARA WHITE: and instead of resilience,

SARA WHITE: they experienced

SARA WHITE: the adverse events as traumatic.

SARA WHITE: Absolutely I doubt my

SARA WHITE: self almost every time.

SARA WHITE: It makes me question why I became a veterinarian.

SARA WHITE: It can be debilitating.

SARA WHITE: Whether it's anesthesia-related,

SARA WHITE: or human error, or

SARA WHITE: surgical complication, it wears on you,

SARA WHITE: and it's been one component

SARA WHITE: that I chose not to deal with anymore

SARA WHITE: and have taken myself from surgery,

SARA WHITE: and put myself on the medical side because

SARA WHITE: the pressure to do good work

SARA WHITE: and fast is all too great.

SARA WHITE: I don't feel the general public has any idea

SARA WHITE: how deeply an adverse event affects us.

SARA WHITE: So what good is it to know all this?

SARA WHITE: How does it help us?

SARA WHITE: First, I think that understanding

SARA WHITE: what happens to us,

SARA WHITE: and understanding that it's a

SARA WHITE: normal response that happens to

SARA WHITE: others can decrease

SARA WHITE: the negative impact of these reactions.

SARA WHITE: By having an idea of what works for others,

SARA WHITE: we each may be able to shape

SARA WHITE: our responses and cope more effectively.

SARA WHITE: Second, I think talking about it

SARA WHITE: decreases the stigma.

SARA WHITE: Since we know that every vet has complications,

SARA WHITE: and has patients die,

SARA WHITE: it's not something that we should be

SARA WHITE: ashamed of talking about with one another.

SARA WHITE: Third, in order to create the safest,

SARA WHITE: most reliable organizations possible,

SARA WHITE: it is really important that we feel

SARA WHITE: comfortable and safe thinking about,

SARA WHITE: and discussing adverse events.

SARA WHITE: This is a cultural shift that summed

SARA WHITE: up in an article about human surgeons

SARA WHITE: but applies to the veterinary medicine as well.

SARA WHITE: As a profession, is it possible

SARA WHITE: to strive for perfection

SARA WHITE: and accept and embrace failure transparently

SARA WHITE: when it occurs? I think we can.

SARA WHITE: Individually, veterinarians

SARA WHITE: may benefit from professional training,

SARA WHITE: and the skills needed for

SARA WHITE: performance while under stress,

SARA WHITE: early recognition of danger,

SARA WHITE: and error recovery,

SARA WHITE: and self-care, and resilience.

SARA WHITE: In addition, individuals can work to care for

SARA WHITE: their own mental and physical health

SARA WHITE: in order to promote resiliency,

SARA WHITE: decrease stress, and prevent burnout.

SARA WHITE: In the current study,

SARA WHITE: some participants benefited

SARA WHITE: from mindfulness training,

SARA WHITE: and many described

SARA WHITE: to exercise as a way to handle

SARA WHITE: the immediate emotional

SARA WHITE: and physiological reactions

SARA WHITE: to adverse events.

SARA WHITE: In addition, study participants noted that

SARA WHITE: having a rich life outside of veterinary medicine,

SARA WHITE: enhance their resilience after adverse events,

SARA WHITE: both for the support provided,

SARA WHITE: and for perspective finding.

SARA WHITE: If you're a manager,

SARA WHITE: there are things you can do to support

SARA WHITE: the veterinary staff who work for you.

SARA WHITE: First, support learning both

SARA WHITE: in the wake of adverse events,

SARA WHITE: and when all is well.

SARA WHITE: Second, support veterinarians,

SARA WHITE: connections with

SARA WHITE: colleagues both within

SARA WHITE: the workplace and elsewhere electronically,

SARA WHITE: or in person at conferences.

SARA WHITE: Third, promote the understanding

SARA WHITE: within each organization or

SARA WHITE: practice that adverse events

SARA WHITE: are a part of veterinary practice,

SARA WHITE: and that high-reliability

SARA WHITE: organizations acknowledge,

SARA WHITE: and prepare for these events even

SARA WHITE: as they strive to decrease their occurrence.

SARA WHITE: Fourth, avoid blame and shame.

SARA WHITE: Create a supportive environment

SARA WHITE: that values learning.

SARA WHITE: Fifth, study and commend instances of

SARA WHITE: successful recovery from or

SARA WHITE: avoidance of adverse events.

SARA WHITE: Sometimes the most remarkable events are

SARA WHITE: those that never happen

SARA WHITE: because safety systems,

SARA WHITE: and safety-minded staff recognize,

SARA WHITE: and avert the problem before it happens.

SARA WHITE: Finally, evaluate cases of complications,

SARA WHITE: and mortality, and assess areas of concern

SARA WHITE: to find gaps in protocols,

SARA WHITE: training, staffing, and other factors.

SARA WHITE: Thanks for taking the time to listen to me.

SARA WHITE: I hope this talk has been helpful for you,

SARA WHITE: and that you have a better idea of how vets

SARA WHITE: cope with one of the hardest parts of their job.