

The science of happiness: achieving sustained psychological wellbeing

WHILE a vast body of research has been dedicated to understanding problems and disorders of mental health, until the recent emergence of a new field of science, little was known about the positive aspects of life – the things that make life worth living. Positive psychology endeavours to understand how individuals and societies thrive and flourish, and how this new knowledge can be applied to foster happiness, health and fulfilment. Here, David Bartram and Ilona Boniwell discuss strategies for enhancing individual wellbeing, which it is hoped will temper some of the challenges and pressures facing veterinary professionals in their daily lives.

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THE statistics are widely known to those within the veterinary profession: the proportion of deaths by suicide relative to the number of deaths by other causes (proportional mortality ratio) in veterinary surgeons is one of the highest of any occupation. It is around four times higher than in the general population and around twice that of other high-risk groups including farmers, pharmacists, and medical and dental practitioners.

But the figures – representing the death by suicide of five veterinary surgeons in England and Wales per year – are just the tip of the iceberg (Kelly and others 1995, Mellanby 2005). For the general population, it has been shown that there are at least 20 reported attempted suicides for every suicide death. There are many more unreported suicide attempts and even more cases of severe, moderate and mild clinical depression. Depression is a robust risk factor for suicide (see box on the right).

WHY THE HIGH SUICIDE RATE?

Possible explanations for the high suicide rate among veterinary surgeons remain speculative, but may include the following:

- Ready access to medicines and knowledge of which drugs and doses are likely to cause death by intentional self-poisoning;
- Personality traits and coping styles

of veterinary school applicants;

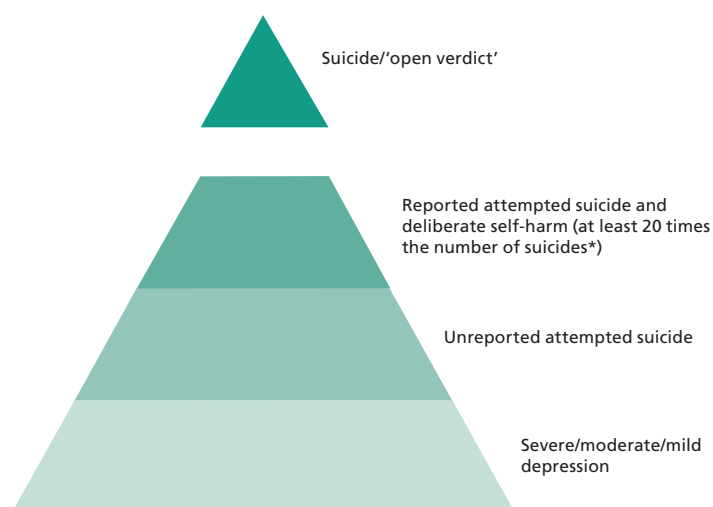
- Social and professional isolation;
- Student debt (now around £17,000 for a new veterinary graduate);
- A 'culture of death' (acceptability of animal euthanasia and slaughter);
- Stigma associated with help-seeking behaviour;
- Rising client expectations;
- Long working hours.

Improving support

Excellent work is done by existing veterinary health initiatives, such as the Vet Helpline and the

Veterinary Surgeons' Health Support Programme, now both under the auspices of the Veterinary Benevolent Fund (VBF). Meanwhile, the Veterinary Support Working Party, which was set up early last year in response to increasing concern about levels of depression and suicide in the veterinary profession, with representatives from the VBF, BVA, RCVS, Association of Veterinary Students and Veterinary Defence Society, has made recommendations to improve support for the veterinary profession. These new measures have

The tip of the iceberg



*Centre for Suicide Research, University of Oxford. The number of people presenting to hospitals following deliberate self-harm episodes exceeds the number of suicides in most countries by at least 20 to 1

become VBF objectives for 2007. The focus of such initiatives has historically been on a reactive model of crisis support. There has been little attention to teaching the skills of wellbeing (they can be learnt) to help prevent emotional crises occurring and enhance work and personal enjoyment and fulfilment.

WHAT IS WELLBEING?

Wellbeing is the term used to refer to a positive state of mind that gives quality to our lives. In psychological literature, wellbeing is postulated to combine 'life satisfaction', or how we think our lives turned out to be, and 'affect', or what we feel about our lives. Wellbeing is related to personal satisfaction, engagement, hope, gratitude, mood stability, meaning, self-esteem, resilience, contentment and optimism. It involves recognising our strengths and developing our interests and talents. This leads to us being creative, playful and involved in what we are doing.

Wellbeing is a key criterion of mental health and has been found to be associated with numerous tangible benefits, such as enhanced physical health (Rosengren and others 1993, Cohen and others 2003) and immune function (Davidson and others 2003), reduced psychological problems, superior coping skills and even longer life (Danner and others 2001).

Why doesn't changing our circumstances make us happier?

The answer is two-fold: adaptation and comparison. We are very adaptable and tend to learn very quickly to view our current position as normal. The effects of any new circumstances on happiness thus diminish quickly or even disappear entirely. The notion of an individual fighting against the effects of adaptation can be likened to an imaginary pedestrian walking up a descending escalator – although the improving circumstances of life propel him upwards towards greater happiness, the process of adaptation forces him back to his initial state (Lyubomirsky and others 2005). We also compare our situation with where we want to be and ourselves to other people. As we change our circumstances, we change who we compare ourselves with and find a new source of unhappiness. The goalposts are always moving!

Positive psychology

Wellbeing is the subject of the relatively new (around nine years old) scientific discipline of positive psychology. The focus is improved functioning, rather than the disease model associated negative paradigm of more traditional psychology. Typically, correlation studies would establish that one thing was reliably associated with another, but did not allow conclusions to be drawn regarding causality. However, a substantial body of experimental and longitudinal empirical research is now being built.

WHAT DETERMINES WELLBEING?

Wellbeing is determined by three primary factors:

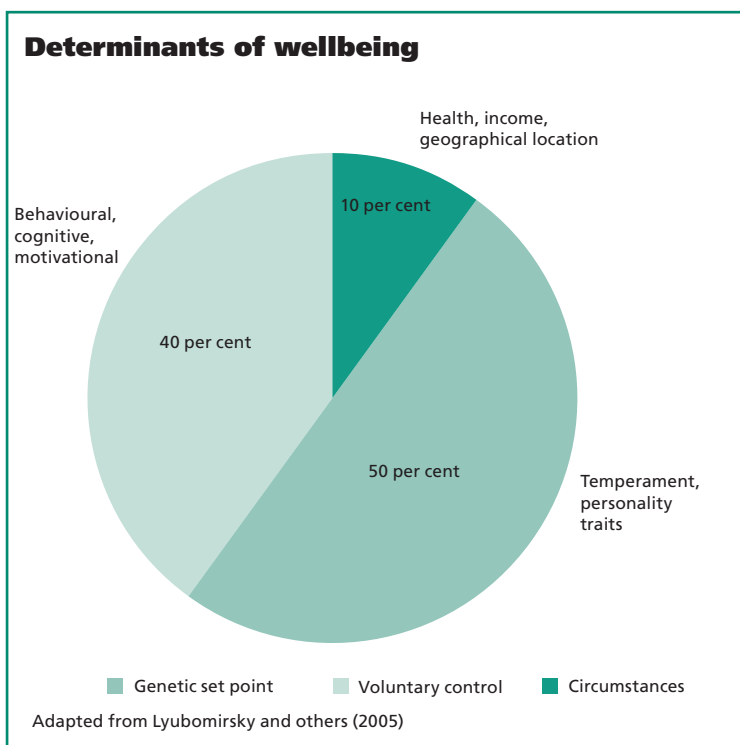
- The genetic set point (a genetically determined level that remains relatively stable and influences temperament, personality traits, and so on);
- Circumstances (health, income, geographical location, and so on);
- Factors under voluntary control (the intentional and effortful practices a person can choose to engage in).

As illustrated in the diagram below, genetics account for up to 50 per cent of the difference in wellbeing between people. This set point has a substantial influence on an individual's happiness (Tellegen and others 1988).

Differences in life circumstances account for only 10 per cent of the variance between people. This defies the popular belief that people would be happier if only they could alter the major circumstances of their lives. Such life circumstances include our income, material possessions, the neighbourhood where we live and the weather.

Factors under voluntary control account for over 40 per cent of variation. Such factors include kindness towards others, regular exercise, participating in cultural life, adopting a positive attitude, and identifying and striving for meaningful goals. Consequently, changing these intentional activities can enhance our wellbeing much more than changing our circumstances. Furthermore, our wellbeing rarely habituates to intentional activities – see box above.

If we can affect 40 per cent of our wellbeing, what should we do? Studies have shown that a variety of interventions can lead to sustained and significant enhancement of wellbeing. One of the authors (D.B.) contacted over 60 university-based academics in the field of positive psychology worldwide in an attempt



to achieve a consensus on the key effective wellbeing-enhancing strategies that are under our voluntary control. These are presented below. Note they are based on empirical research; not the mere fuzzy platitudes of self-appointed 'self-help' gurus. Most are common sense 'positive life practices' but, to quote Voltaire, 'common sense is not so common.'

HOW TO ENHANCE AND SUSTAIN INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING

Develop and maintain close personal relationships

Be connected to your partner, friends, family and colleagues. This affects happiness more than any other single factor, enabling us to confide and discuss problems and generating a sense of community, trust and belonging. These relationships form a 'support network' to avoid emotional isolation. Diener and Seligman (2002), in their study of exceptionally happy people (the upper 10 per cent), found only one main difference between the happiest and the rest of their sample. The very happy people had a rich and fulfilling social life: they spent the least time alone, had good relationships with friends and had a current romantic partner. Having a work-related mentor – a wise and trusted professional friend with whom you can confidentially discuss work-related matters – can also contribute to a sense of relatedness.

Look after your physical health and get enough sleep

Exercise and diet are obviously important, but also plan times of rest and relaxation into each day: even 15 minutes a day can make a

Making 'flow' happen

'Flow' is the state of mind when we are so involved in what we are doing that everything else disappears from our consciousness. Our mind isn't wandering; we are totally focused, concentrated on, engaged in and committed to an activity. Only when we come out of the experience do we realise how much time has actually passed. The state of flow happens under specific conditions – when we encounter a challenge that is testing for our skills, and yet our capacity is such that we are just able to meet this challenge (Csikszentmihalyi 1998).

difference. A study by Babyak and others (2000) demonstrated that clinically depressed patients who were assigned to a modest aerobic exercise programme were three and a half to four times less likely to relapse 10 months later than those prescribed medication only or, interestingly, even those prescribed a combination of medication and exercise. Optimal sleepers (those sleeping an average of six to eight and a half hours per night) report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of environmental mastery (the extent to which a person feels that he or she has control over life circumstances), personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self acceptance than suboptimal sleepers (Hamilton and others 2007).

Keep a sense of perspective – does it really matter?

There are negative feelings in life, and experience shows that these pass; we learn from them and begin to enjoy life again. Situations that seem impossibly bad turn out not to be so, while goals that seem incredibly important are only a small part of life. We can experience adversity and come through it. Do not be lured into the trap of perfectionism (self-defeating thoughts and behaviours associated with high and un-

realistic goals). Be satisfied with 'good enough' – only go for 'best' when it really matters.

Engage yourself regularly, preferably daily, in activities that create 'flow'

That is to say, become so fully immersed in a rewarding task that you forget everything else: truly living in the present. Such tasks will be very specific to you, such as singing in a choir, dancing, playing sport, reading a good book, and aspects of work. Gradually increase the difficulty or complexity of your flow activities, ensuring that they match your growing skills. Allocate leisure time intelligently, away from passive activities such as watching television, so it contributes to your wellbeing (see box above).

Reflect upon, savour and be grateful for the good things in your life

Think about the things in your life for which you can be grateful, no matter how small they are. Consider keeping a 'gratitude journal'. Research demonstrates that writing down three good things that took place today and reflecting on your role in them lastingly increases wellbeing and decreases depression (Seligman and others 2005).

Do not expect money to bring you happiness

Material wealth beyond basic subsistence fails to produce enduring happiness; we become habituated, our aspirations rise and we continue to envy those who are even better off (Myers 2000).

Engage in activities that are meaningful to you

In other words, activities that are motivating, offer security, challenge, some autonomy and in which you can take pride. If your work is not a calling, have a purpose that you

Confiding relationships

Articulating negative feelings (or writing about them) has a positive and significant effect (Frattaroli 2006) that can bring about an emotional catharsis. The highly structured nature of language invites organisation and analysis that occur in the process of creating a coherent narrative, which often leads to searching for meaning and enhanced understanding. This brings a sense of clarity, perspective, resolution and control that mere private thought cannot provide. We may prefer to speak to someone anonymously and in complete confidence – what T. S. Eliot described (in *The Cocktail Party*, 1949) as 'the luxury of an intimate disclosure to a stranger'. A number of organisations provide such support by telephone – see box on page 482.

Keys to happiness at work

Warr (2007) identifies the following factors as being fundamental to happiness in the workplace:

- Positive contact with other people
- A manageable workload and goals
- The belief that we are doing something worthwhile
- Having variety in tasks, skills or location
- Some personal control – discretion and decision latitude
- Supportive and considerate supervision
- A sense of involvement in changes
- The opportunity to use and acquire personal skills
- A reasonably clear role
- Recognition of achievements
- The freedom to voice ideas and be heard
- A sense of job security
- Equity – shared expectations, fairness, absence of discrimination
- Safe and comfortable surroundings
- Doing a job that is valued by the organisation and society

Implications for employers

Psychological wellbeing is a serious business issue – it has a strong positive correlation with work performance. Employers should:

- Encourage participative management through communication
- Find out what each employee wants from their employment relationship and as far as possible tailor the job around their needs
- Measure employee attitudes and undertake regular work-related stress assessments – such as the HSE stress indicator tool at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/indicatortool.pdf
- Conduct performance appraisals; coach and guide; acknowledge and appreciate
- Foster an environment that blends support with appropriate levels of challenge
- Support staff to identify their own strengths, interests and skills and enhance their opportunities to use them at work
- Build cohesive teams
- Ensure demands are reasonable
- Provide opportunities for training and development
- Encourage a culture where people can express feelings
- Establish flexible work schedules

pursue elsewhere such as voluntary work or teaching. Embrace your spiritual dimension – a connection to something beyond yourself that is not simply religious affiliation, but strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose. Have peripheral interests too, avoiding the vulnerability of allowing your life to revolve around one issue (Seligman 2003).

Be content with who you are and be yourself

Care solely about other people's approval and you will forever be their prisoner. Identify your personal talents and strengths and live life in such a way that enables you to use them to the fullest extent. You can identify your character strengths by completing a freely available questionnaire on a University of Pennsylvania website,

www.authentic happiness.org. Give yourself permission to be human: rejecting our emotions, positive or negative, leads to frustration and unhappiness.

New developments

- A website is being developed by the VBF at www.vetlife.org to make support available to the UK veterinary profession accessible in one place. This is due to be launched at the end of September 2007
- Reports on suicide rates within the veterinary profession have been published in the literature but there has been very little work to investigate the causes and identify key stressors. As part of an independent, academic research project (the Vet Wellbeing Initiative) on mental health and wellbeing in the UK veterinary profession, questionnaires will be mailed to a stratified random sample of 3200 practising veterinary surgeons in October 2007. Further details are available on www.vetwellbeing.co.uk
- An interactive theatre project, 'Practice Imperfect', developed within Exeter University's department of drama and dealing with stress in the veterinary profession, is hoping to secure funding to tour nationally to veterinary audiences in 2008

Develop a sense of control

It is important to know that you have some influence over what happens to you. There is an extensive body of research linking sense of control with both physical and psychological health (Rodin 1986).

Learn to be optimistic

Be positive but remain realistic. Learn to challenge your automatic negative thoughts, dispute pessimistic explanations and reframe situations in a positive light (Seligman 1991).

Give yourself regular treats

However, do not be trapped by the shallow sole pursuit of pleasure by doing only those things that bring immediate gratification and pleasurable feelings. Positive emotions expand our capacity to think creatively and see the big picture, but too many of them may result in the experience of languishing – that is, feeling your life is 'hollow' or 'empty' (Fredrickson and Losada 2005).

Simplify

We are, generally, too busy – trying to squeeze more and more activities into less and less time. Quantity influences quality, and we compromise on our happiness by trying to do too much. Learn to say 'no' without feeling guilty (Schwartz 2005).

Only take time to choose carefully when the decision is important

Decisions have become increasingly complex due to the overwhelming abundance of choice with which we are faced. When presented with many options, happy and unhappy

Useful resources

■ Vet Helpline 07659 811118

Emotional support and information from trained volunteers with specific knowledge of the veterinary profession

■ Veterinary Surgeons' Health Support Programme 07946 634220

Specific help and action on alcohol, drug abuse and addiction

■ Samaritans 08457 909090

'Listening' emotional support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those that could lead to suicide

individuals show divergent responses to mundane (eg, choosing a dessert) and profound decisions (eg, selecting a home). Furthermore, having too many choices results in a simple inability to choose. For relatively inconsequential decisions, try to be satisfied with an option that is merely good enough, rather than seeking to make the absolute best choice. Have the discipline to focus solely on those decisions that are important and ignore the rest to ultimately derive greater satisfaction from the choices you have to make (Schwartz 2005).

Be good to others

Being kind and of service to others on a regular basis is a key ingredient of happiness. There are also health and longevity benefits from helping behaviour that is fulfilling but not overwhelming (Post 2007). Practising so-called random acts of kindness enhances your own wellbeing (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2004).

WELLBEING – A STATE OF MIND

Osler (1932), one of the most distinguished physicians of the early 20th century and a former professor of medicine at the University of Oxford, made an observation of doctors that could equally apply to veterinary surgeons: 'To each one of you the practice of medicine will be

very much as you make it – to one a worry, a care, a perpetual annoyance; to another, a daily joy and a life of as much happiness and usefulness as can well fall to the lot of man.' Therein lies a role for the new science of wellbeing.

Wellbeing is determined more by our state of mind than by our external conditions, circumstances, or events once our basic survival needs are met. It can be achieved through the systematic training of our mind, through reshaping attitudes and outlook. This is not to imply that any veterinary suicides could have been or necessarily will be prevented by such strategies. Nor must it be an excuse for failing to help make the veterinary work environment more tolerable, encouraging us to

look inwards for the causes of our troubles.

Yet this new focus on positive psychology is yielding unprecedented insights into human behaviour and fostering the development of interventions that enhance the lives of ordinary people, not just those with pathology. Individuals aspiring to a level of wellbeing that is higher than their set point must invest time and energy in implementing strategies to enhance wellbeing and making them habitual. The wellbeing-enhancing strategies under our voluntary control that have been discussed in this article provide us with a compass bearing for our positive mental health. Pursuing wellbeing takes work but it may be the most rewarding work we ever do.

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Further reading

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