

Veterinary professionals and anxiety

Dr Kirstie Pickles BVMS MSc PG Cert (Couns Skills)
PhD CertEM (IntMed) DipECEIM MRCVS

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What is Anxiety?

Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in their life. Anxiety is a natural evolutionary 'fight or flight' response which readies our body for action following a potentially threatening situation.

The release of adrenaline and cortisol causes the physical feelings of anxiety by increasing heart and respiratory rates and sweat production. Anxiety helps protect us from danger and motivates us towards finding a solution to a problem. It is also perfectly normal to feel a sense of anxiety or worry in 'high stakes' situations like going for an interview or a first day at a new job. In these situations, a small amount of anxiety can enhance alertness and performance. However, too much anxiety will decrease concentration and performance.

For some people feelings of anxiety become more overwhelming and interfere with normal daily life. Anxiety has serious long-term health effects and is associated with a 26% increased risk of incident heart disease, 48% increased risk of cardiac mortality (Roest et al 2010), and a younger age at the time of first myocardial infarction (Mathur et al 2016). There are also modest effects of anxiety increasing cancer incidence and mortality (Wang et al 2020).

Anxiety is the main symptom of several conditions, including generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety disorder (social phobia). A panic attack is a feeling of sudden and intense anxiety which

may be accompanied by physical symptoms, including shaking, feeling disorientated or dizzy, rapid, irregular heart rate, dry mouth, nausea, hyperventilation, and sweating. Whilst not dangerous, the symptoms of a panic attack are extremely unpleasant and can be very frightening, especially when experienced for the first time. Panic attacks last somewhere from 5 minutes to half an hour.

Anxiety within the veterinary profession is common (Bartram et al 2009; Best et al 2020; Peret et al 2020). Bartram et al (2009) reported a prevalence of 26.1% in a survey of 1,796 veterinary surgeons, which is higher than that in the UK general population (Bartram et al 2009). Similarly, 60% of 4th year students reported moderate to very severe anxiety about clinical rotations with a greater prevalence in female students and students with a fixed rather than growth mindset (Bostock et al 2018). Longer working hours (Shirangi et al 2013) and lack of control over speed of work and discretion (Hesketh and Shouksmith 1986) have been associated with veterinary surgeon anxiety whilst increasing age, increasing time in current job, increasing years since graduation and male gender were associated with fewer signs of anxiety (Fritschi et al 2009).

Symptoms of Anxiety

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
<p><i>Cardiovascular:</i> palpitations, racing heart</p> <p><i>Respiratory:</i> hyperventilation, shortness of breath</p> <p><i>Neurological:</i> dizziness, headache, sweating, numbness</p> <p><i>Gastrointestinal:</i> dry mouth, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, urinary frequency</p> <p><i>Musculoskeletal:</i> muscle aches, restlessness, tremor</p>	<p>Unrealistic or excessive fear; sense of dread</p> <p>Racing mind, going blank</p> <p>Reduced concentration or memory, confusion</p> <p>Difficulty making decisions</p> <p>Irritability, impatience</p> <p>Restlessness, nervousness</p> <p>Sleep disturbance, tiredness</p> <p>Intrusive thoughts</p>	<p>Avoidance of situations</p> <p>Repetitive compulsive behaviours</p> <p>Distress in social situations</p> <p>Distressing urges to escape situations</p>

Table 1: Symptoms of anxiety

Causes of Anxiety

Anyone can experience anxiety but some individuals are at higher risk than others.

Risk factors include:

- Genetics, a close family member with anxiety
- Being a sensitive and emotional person
- Adverse childhood experience e.g. abuse, bereavement
- Persistent or extreme stress
- Poverty, poor education, social disadvantage
- Traumatic life event e.g. victim of crime, serious illness, bullying, divorce
- Having another mental health diagnosis
- Substance use and abuse (including alcohol)

When to Seek Help

It is useful to seek support if anxiety impacts your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, anxiety may be a problem if:

- your feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time,
- your fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation,
- you avoid situations that might cause you to feel anxious,
- your worries feel very distressing or are hard to control,
- you regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which could include panic attacks,
- you find it hard to go about your everyday life or do things you enjoy.

Sources of Support

There are many sources of support available for people wanting help with anxiety. These include:

Self-help

Self-help can take many forms including talking to friends and family, reading evidence-based websites or self-help books, regular exercise, reducing caffeine and alcohol, regular meals and a healthy diet, engaging in hobbies, ensuring adequate sleep, practising relaxation techniques and mindfulness, yoga, cognitive behavioural therapy books or apps.

Physical inactivity has been identified as a risk factor for the development of anxiety whereas people who engage in more physical activity have a reduced risk of being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and less frequent and severe anxiety symptoms (Kandola et al 2018). Moreover, exercise-based interventions are effective as standalone or adjunctive therapies for reducing anxiety symptoms (Stonerock et al 2015).

Engaging regularly in mindfulness practice potentially acted as a protective factor for veterinary students experiencing anxiety. Individuals who regularly engaged in mindfulness practice once a week or more throughout the semester reported significantly lower depression and anxiety symptoms than those who practiced less than once a week (Correia et al 2017).

The Hub of Hope is a useful mental health support database bringing local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support and services together in one place. Services can be searched by postcode or town so that services local to your area can be found.

A recent study has shown that opportunities for veterinary surgeons to disclose concerns to peers may be related to decreased experiences of compassion fatigue, anxiety, and depression when responsiveness of the listener is also present (Reif-Stice et al 2020). Additionally listening support from helplines such as Vetlife, the Samaritans, and the text messaging support service Shout is available.

Vetlife Helpline

Vetlife provides confidential and free help for everyone in the veterinary community including veterinary nurses, students and non-clinical staff. The Vetlife Helpline is available 24h a day, 365 days a year by an experienced team of volunteers familiar with the veterinary profession who provide a confidential listening service. People can also self-refer, or be referred by the Vetlife Helpline, to Vetlife Health Support which provides access to mental health professionals who will offer an assessment and advice or care management.

Doctor

An appointment with a GP will allow other possible medical causes of the symptoms experienced to be excluded. Initially GPs usually advise patients to seek self-help for anxiety so that the individual understands more about anxiety, their triggers, and how to manage symptoms. Further support may also be advised such as talking therapy which may be on an individual or group basis and/or medication.

Talking therapy

Talking therapy available on the NHS usually takes the form of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and may have long waiting times. CBT is evidenced to improve anxiety outcomes in a primary care setting (Carpenter et al 2018; Zhang et al 2019).

People can also self-refer to the NHS Talking Therapies scheme (formerly known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies or IAPT). In addition to evidence-based talking therapies for anxiety and depression, this service can also provide employment advice to support people to reach their employment goals. Talking therapy is again CBT based and can be provided in different ways, including using a self-help workbook or website with the support of a therapist one-to-one in person, over the phone or through video consultation, or in a group. In 2021/22, 1.2 million people accessed NHS Talking Therapies and the service is currently being expanded with the aim to reach 1.9 million people per year by the end of 2023/4 (NHS 2023).

Private Talking Therapy

A number of options are available for private talking therapy including counselling and psychological therapy. Such services can help gain an understanding of what might have led to the feelings of anxiety, what might be keeping it going, and can help to find supportive strategies and regulate your physical and emotional states. Ensure that the counsellor or psychologist is registered with the British Association of Counselling Practitioners or British Psychological Society. It is essential to the therapeutic relationship that you and the therapist have a good rapport and therefore you may need to meet or talk to several practitioners before you find the right one.

Employee Assistance Programmes

Larger companies may have employee assistance programmes which offer a number of free wellbeing services including counselling. Programmes will differ according to services offered and number of sessions accessible so investigate what is available in your practice.

Vetlife Health Support

For those unable to access talking therapies, Vetlife Health Support can provide an assessment and advice or care management; guiding and supporting you to ensure you get the care that you need. Referrals can be made through the Vetlife Helpline.

Resources and References

Resources

British Association of Counselling Practitioners
<https://www.bacp.co.uk/>

British Psychological Association
<https://www.bps.org.uk/>

Hub of Hope <https://hubofhope.co.uk/>
App available on android and iphones.

NHS Anxiety Self-Help <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing#anxiety-and-panic>

NHS Talking Therapies <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service>

Samaritans <https://www.samaritans.org/>
Tel: 116 123; Email: jo@samaritans.org
(email response may take several days)

Shout <https://giveusashout.org/> Text 'SHOUT' to 85258

Vetlife <https://www.vetlife.org.uk/>
Helpline: 03030402551

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Vetlife 24/7 confidential helpline

0303 040 2551

Anonymous email support via website

helpline.vetlife.org.uk