

Veterinary professionals and loneliness

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Loneliness in the Veterinary Community

It takes courage to acknowledge feeling lonely. There's a stigma to it, and it's often trivialised. Saying you're lonely can feel like disclosing a vulnerability. People feel they need to hide it, to put on a façade.

Every call to Vetlife Helpline is completely confidential and we would never speak or write about them, even anonymised, but we do hear themes around loneliness in our calls. These themes may be expressed by:

- veterinary professionals who are lonely because they cannot get locum cover for their practice to take a break and have consequently been unable to see family and friends;
- veterinary students who are lonely, surrounded by people but lacking connection to family and loved ones, maybe feeling they don't fit in;
- veterinary professionals worried about isolated and lonely farmers for whom they are themselves offering support;
- any member of the veterinary community experiencing loneliness associated with a transition to retirement;
- those who feel isolated in their workplace due to bullying;
- people who may be cut off from work connections because of physical health problems and who are professionally isolated;

and many more.

During the early stages of the Corona virus pandemic these references to themes of loneliness increased, as connecting with others became harder, and interpersonal bonds between people were, in many cases, harder to maintain.

Admission of Loneliness

Many people feel ashamed to admit loneliness. But loneliness doesn't mean we aren't likeable, and loneliness isn't the same as being alone. One of the first steps to understanding loneliness is realising that people can be lonely in a crowded room; surrounded by others but lacking high quality connection to them.

In his book: 'Together: Loneliness, Health and What Happens When We Find Connection' Dr Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States defines loneliness as: "the subjective feeling that you're lacking the social connections you need, or cut off from the people with whom you belong – even if you're surrounded by other people. Being lonely is missing that feeling of closeness, trust and the affection of loved ones, friends, and community"¹.

For many people it is hard to imagine that veterinary professionals could be lonely, However, if one considers the different dimensions of loneliness, it becomes apparent just how common loneliness can be. Emotional, social, cultural, collective, and workplace connectedness are all important^{2,3,4}. A lack in any of these dimensions can result in our feeling lonely, which helps to explain why someone might have a busy job and extended professional network, but be lonely and need more connection.

Factors Affecting Loneliness

General: Multiple factors affect loneliness: health, age, relationship status, housing, and more². Research so far has tended to focus on individual factors that affect loneliness, but broader influences are increasingly recognised as also being important.

Health: At Vetlife we speak to many veterinary professionals and students who feel lonely in part because of health conditions. There is a two-way relationship between loneliness and health, with health affecting how lonely we feel and loneliness affecting health. People with a range of mental health conditions are more at risk of being lonely, and there is a link between loneliness and suicide⁶. Loneliness has big health impacts, for both physical and mental health across a wide range of health conditions^{2,5,7}.

Workplace: Loneliness in the workplace is a growing area of research interest. Being in work is generally linked to lower loneliness, however loneliness at work is an important issue for the veterinary profession, and a common theme on calls to Vetlife Helpline. Connection with others is an important part of motivation and satisfaction at work⁸ and loneliness is linked to lower wellbeing and also to higher staff turnover².

Employment: Features of work can contribute to loneliness. Temporary rather than permanent contracts are more associated with loneliness⁹. People who have moved from their usual social networks for work are more affected by loneliness – an issue we often see amongst new graduate vets and nurses as well as students. Bullying and other

workplace factors can influence loneliness too, including workplace cultures that encourage interpersonal competition, personal conflict and mistrust^{10,11}.

Location: Location based factors may also be relevant to veterinary professionals living in remote areas with difficult transport condition. Situations in which minorities may be socially isolated, or where digital connectivity is poor can particularly affect loneliness in young people¹². However living in densely populated urban areas including at university¹³ may be equally problematic. Generally, loneliness is lower in greener more walkable areas and where people feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods².

Culture: Culture is an important component in loneliness, to which the type of workplace culture and professional identity often found in the veterinary professions – particularly around self-reliance¹⁴ - may at times contribute.

Discrimination: Discrimination, whether direct and indirect, may be a contributing factor to an overall increase in loneliness. A sense of belonging helps to counteract feelings of loneliness. Racism, discrimination and xenophobia are all additional triggers of loneliness which may often be overlooked^{15, 16}.

Combatting Loneliness

The research evidence on what helps with loneliness isn't definitive. Tips for loneliness tend to focus on individuals, which doesn't address the bigger factors that can cause loneliness. Here are some ideas for workplaces, supporting about those around us, and thinking about ourselves.

Action in the workplace

- **Prioritise induction:** Effective induction can help wellbeing and fitness at work¹⁴.
- **Tackle discrimination:** Loneliness is just one of the many harms that can come directly and indirectly from discrimination.
- **Promote spaces for community:** Facilitate staff having time to connect. Include creation of break spaces, time for informal peer support, and encourage a workplace culture where there is time both for people to take their breaks, and where people feel able to take them.
- **Encourage peer support:** Peer support from colleagues and support from immediate line managers are both vital components of wellbeing at work.

Support for others

- **Lead with compassion:** Support a culture where people can be vulnerable: If a workplace culture is such that people cannot 'admit' vulnerability, they are more likely to have lower quality connections and be lonely. Pressure to pretend that everything is perfect makes it hard for anything more than superficial connection to occur. Compassionate leadership and leaders who

are trained in active listening are important in staff support.

- **Be the difference:** Sadly research suggests people are less likely to befriend someone described as lonely². Looking out for colleagues and prioritising time to connect is important. Even setting a short amount of time aside each week to think about and reaching out to someone who may be less connected can help.

Thinking about ourselves

- **Make high quality time:** With on-call commitments and the blurring of work and home high-quality time is hard to achieve. Although it requires effort it is worthwhile to nurture connection with family and friends with phone and other distractions out of reach, even if it is only for 15 minutes at a time.
- **Act the opposite:** Loneliness can be a vicious cycle. Feeling lonely makes it harder to connect with others. It can make us want to withdraw. Think about it as might an animal separated from the group¹; in this circumstance our threat perception shifts such that we may perceive things to be a threat which may not be. When we are lonely our attention shifts to ourselves and our personal worries. We may be more likely

to assume offers of connections are a threat to us, which may in turn cause us to become even more lonely. Sometimes we need to act in the opposite way to how we instinctively feel order to break that cycle.

- **Use technology with care:** Technology can have a huge positive role in connection, but there can be downsides too. If your use of social media compares yourself when tired and disconnected with the carefully curated perfect moments of others, it may leave you feeling worse [ref]. Being aware about the pitfalls of technology helps you to make real connections and to use it to your advantage.
- **Connect with yourself:** Self-awareness and interaction with others from a grounded place with self-compassion may help increase the quality of the connections we can make.

If you need to talk or are worried about someone, please call or share information about Vetlife Helpline. Vetlife Helpline is available 24 hours a day every day for confidential support on 03030 040 2551 or email via www.vetlife.org.uk

8. References

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