VETERINARY Perfection
Why good enough should be good enough

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What is your greatest weakness?” It’s that standard
question near the end of a job interview. Of
course it isn’t wise at this point to discuss the
weaknesses that actually impact on your working life.
Detailing the extent of your Facebook habit, your dodgy
timekeeping, or how irritable you become when tired, may
not be the best way to sell yourself to a prospective employer
you are trying to impress. So what do we say instead? Very
often candidates suggest that they are a perfectionist. A lover
do detail who will check and recheck, stay late, try too hard.
Interview coaching websites even have perfectionism as a
model answer to this question, a negative question turned
into a positive by a trait that employers will be attracted to.
But what is being a perfectionist at work actually like? Does
perfectionism help or hinder a vet’s working life?

What is perfectionism?
Perfectionism is the tendency to employ high standards
and overly critical self-evaluation (Frost and Marten, 1990). It
has been linked to a range of psychological and physical
disorders as well as being closely linked with normal
functioning. Some manifestations of perfectionism can be
adaptive, and associated with benefits; however the majority
of the effects of perfectionism are maladaptive, and cause
difficulties for the individual.

Perfectionism has been associated with psychological
disorders including depression, OCD, anorexia nervosa and
bulimia nervosa, social phobia, performance anxiety in groups
as diverse as professional athletes and college students, as well
as suicidal thoughts. Over the last 20 years our understanding
of perfectionism has increased, and a number of different
scales developed to assess and study it. Perfectionism is now
understood as a multidimensional personality characteristic,
with more than one type.

One of the most popular models of perfectionism, developed
by Hewitt and Flett (1991b) identifies two main forms
of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism, and socially
prescribed perfectionism.

Self-oriented perfectionism is when an individual believes
that being perfect is important and is characterised by setting
excessively high standards for oneself.

Socially prescribed perfectionism is when an individual
believes others have set high standards for them and is
characterised by the thought that to be accepted by others,
they need to fulfil those standards.

In a recent paper, Stoeber (2014) reviews evidence on these
two dimensions of perfectionism and highlights that most
studies agree that socially prescribed perfectionism is a negative
form of perfectionism showing strong and consistent positive
correlations with psychological difficulties. Self-oriented
perfectionism is not entirely negative and as well as being linked
to psychological difficulties also has links to indicators of good
psychological adjustment such as positive affect, goal progress,
and academic achievement.

It’s a complicated picture, and just as the consequences can
be complex, so too can the causes. The link between
perfectionism and personality has been extensively explored,
and associations have been made between perfectionism
and two of the Big Five personality traits, neuroticism and
conscientiousness, with conscientiousness being associated with
self-orientated perfectionism and neuroticism with socially
prescribed perfectionism. However, although traits such as
the Big Five play a role in the development of lower level
personality characteristics like perfectionism, they don’t explain
the whole story.

Perfectionism in individuals can have its origin in the family,
in personality traits and in cultural influences, including group
level culture such as work or learning environments.
Vets and perfectionism

Most people who’ve been in a vet school environment around exam time will have experience of how cultural pressures can impact on working behaviour. When you see everyone else working and achieving very high standards, it can be hard to resist feeling some of the pressures being experienced by others. There is evidence that we may be selecting for perfectionism in the veterinary profession too. This question often arises when considering the high suicide rate in the profession. We know that vets are three to four times more likely than the general population to die by suicide (Platt et al., 2010). This raises questions around whether there is something about veterinary working life or training that causes mental ill health, or whether the veterinary profession is selecting a ‘risky phenotype’ – selecting people who, because of genetic, or prior experiential factors, are already at elevated risk of going on to develop mental health problems, and/or be at risk of suicide.

These factors are clearly not exclusive. The suicide rate and mental ill health in the veterinary profession is likely to be a mixture of both causal and selection factors, combined with an amplification of personality factors in a highly pressured environment. However, as Platt (Platt et al., 2012b) observes, the psychological characteristics of those attracted to the veterinary profession are relatively under-researched, so selection factors are poorly understood.

Perfectionism is a personality trait which may be selected for by the very competitive veterinary training application process. Veterinary courses in the UK are persistently oversubscribed and selectors can afford to choose only candidates with top level grades and who have shown strong vocational motivation in gaining relevant work experience prior to veterinary school, often whilst still at school and from early teenage years.

It has been suggested that vets may be especially vulnerable to suicide because of the high academic requirements for entry to veterinary training (Halliwell et al., 2005) which may select for individuals with perfectionistic traits and high achievement (Haas, 1994). However, as Bartram and Baldwin (2008) highlight, the association between intelligence and mental ill health and suicide is unclear. Perfectionistic personality traits are associated with suicidal behaviour (O Connor, 2007) and are known to be prominent in the medical profession (Platt et al., 2012b, Blachly et al., 1963) and personality traits among doctors and medical students are known to differ from the general population (Clack et al., 2004, Meit et al., 2005, Meit et al., 2007) but their prevalence in the veterinary profession is not known.

People who are perfectionistic are at increased risk of depression (Hewitt and Dyck, 1986, Hewitt and Flett, 1991a), judge their work harshly, and experience negative affects before during and after evaluative tasks (Frost et al., 1990). Experience of failure may also be very difficult for those with high levels of perfectionism (Blatt, 1995, Frost et al., 1990, Hamilton and Schweitzer, 2000). As failure is an inevitable part of clinical work, people with perfectionistic traits may struggle to adapt to the clinical environment.

Hamilton and Schweitzer (2000) assessed the relationship between perfectionism and suicidal thoughts in (non-veterinary) university students in Australia and found a significant and positive relationship between increased levels of perfectionism and suicidal thoughts. Veterinary students who may be accustomed to being the highest achievers among their pre-veterinary cohort may find themselves at veterinary school surrounded by others of very similar ability, and may struggle to adjust to this. Veterinary students report veterinary school to be an extremely competitive environment, a theme which emerged strongly in interviews with veterinary students with a history of suicidal thoughts (Allister, 2011). This may contribute to some students feeling inadequate or suffering feelings of being an imposter or academic fraud (Zenner et al., 2005, Kogan et al., 2005). Imposter syndrome and difficulties with the transition to professional training are described in students in other healthcare professions (Henning et al., 1998) and are currently being studied in the veterinary profession too.

In Platt’s study of 21 UK veterinary surgeons with a history of suicidal thoughts or behaviour, when asked for their own explanations of the high suicide rate in the veterinary profession, unprompted, 11/21 participants described veterinary surgeons as having personality traits that were likely to expose them to difficulties (Platt et al., 2012a). Difficulties allied to those experienced by the participants included perfectionism, difficulty adjusting when veterinary working life was different to their expectations, a sense of pressure to succeed because others around them appeared to cope, pressure while studying and a sense of failure (Platt et al., 2012a).

So perfectionism is a lot more problematic than just the conscientious hard-working portrayal we show to interviewers and it can have drastic consequences. The statistics paint a troubling picture. But like many of the issues associated with mental ill health in the profession, there are things that can be done to help.

Continued overleaf...

References available on request from Practice Life.
Veterinary Perfectionism: What can you do about it?

So what can you do if you recognise that you have perfectionistic beliefs in yourself and realise that these are holding you back from living in a way that makes you fulfilled and happy?

How many of these statements apply to you?
• Nothing ever gives you a feeling of lasting worth
• Achieving perfection at work will earn you love and respect
• You achieve goals but are left feeling unfulfilled
• You often think your work is not good enough and compare yourself to others
• You measure your self-worth by your achievements
• You can't give yourself permission to do a 'good enough' job, you feel pressure to be extraordinary and faultless
• Even when you do achieve you feel you don't deserve it

This isn't any kind of diagnostic test, but if you find those statements resonating, it might be time to review the role perfectionism has in your life, and the impact it's having on your working life. Ask people what they want in life and you will get a variety of responses, but for most people it comes down to love and respect. People struggling with perfectionism can get caught up in the belief that the only route to love and respect is through high achievement, through faultless, extraordinary work. This is almost always a trap, and doesn't lead to the sort of lasting happiness people are looking for. It leads to years on a work-treadmill and never really feeling fulfilled.

So what can you do?
• In his book on Performance Addiction, Arthur Ciaramicoli (2004) advises that a first step to tackling perfectionism can be to return to the scene of the crime. This isn't hours of Freudian introspection, but just reflecting on which situations you first felt that perfection in your work would achieve you love and respect. By identifying when your perfectionism started you may be able to better understand those early influences when you first started to believe worth was determined by achievement.

• Perhaps reflect upon who it is you feel you have to prove yourself to. If the only answer you have is yourself, is the effort and disruption the perfectionism is causing your life worth the short lived feelings of achievement?

• Another technique, which makes use of perfectionist's love of detail and measurement – but tries to create balance rather than destroy it – is to take a weekly personal inventory. Take a moment to look at your week, identifying things that are good for you and reviewing whether and how often you did them that week. This might be taking time to eat lunch, to exercise, to read to your kids. Try not to make this an exercise in self-punishment. It's about making sure the basics of self-care and wellbeing are included in your weekly goals too, and don't get lost in your quest for achievement at work. Use this technique to gain more control over the targets that are important in life, not just those at work.

• Find something in your life where you can learn or develop but where that sense of joy at learning is not lost through endless assessment and competition, where improvement is possible but not a requirement. Experiment with recapturing the joy of learning a skill without the burden of assessment or exams.

• Spend time with people who respect you for who you are, not what you do. Find people in your life who seem to have a good work life balance and use them as role models, as well as those you aspire to be like in academic or work fields.

Finally, if you feel that your perfectionism is coexisting with other problems, or you don't know if you can tackle it alone, seek help. Perfectionistic thinking may label seeking help as a sign of weakness, but actually asking for help takes strength. Call Vet Helpline, speak to someone you trust at work, or your GP or counsellor. We know that asking for help is really difficult for vets but there are people out there who want to help.

Vet Helpline can be reached on 07659 811 118

For more about wellbeing see www.vetlife.org.uk/wellbeing. VBF, the registered charity that supports the veterinary profession, offers free, confidential and professional support through the Veterinary Surgeons’ Health Support Programme to anyone in the profession who is struggling with depression. The National Co-ordinator of the programme can be contacted at VSHSP@vetlife.org.uk or 07946 634220.