# Understanding and managing stress in the veterinary workplace

## RCVS Mind Matters

Revised Edition April 2025

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# About this guide

**Well-organised, meaningful work and a good working environment are beneficial for our health and wellbeing.** However, even for those who normally enjoy their work, most jobs can involve difficulties at times. If these difficulties are frequent or prolonged, they can make work stressful, which in turn can affect our wellbeing. Work-related stress is associated with poorer work performance, increased absenteeism, and greater staff turnover. The importance of tackling stress at work is clear.

This guide provides advice to veterinary workplaces on evidence-based approaches to addressing work-related stress and supporting wellbeing. It considers how workplaces can organise and manage work to reduce stress risk, but also includes advice for individuals on things that can help to buffer the personal impact when difficulties at work occur. It is designed for everyone who has an interest in wellbeing in veterinary workplaces, particularly those in leadership roles or who have line-management responsibilities.

The guide begins with an explanation of the root causes of stress at work and why it is important to address it. It describes evidence-based approaches to managing work-related stress, with links to resources on applying these in practice. The guide also provides advice on what to do if a colleague is experiencing stress or you have concerns about someone's wellbeing. The final section includes specific guidance for those in leadership roles, including line managers, on supporting wellbeing at work

The guide has been developed by Elinor O'Connor, Professor of Occupational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) Mind Matters Initiative.

## Did you know?

'Occupational psychologists aim to increase the effectiveness of the organisation and improve the job satisfaction of individuals.' (British Psychological Society, 2025).

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# What is work stress?

**In offering a sense of purpose and opportunities to make a difference, working in the veterinary sector can be personally and professionally fulfilling.** However, by its nature, veterinary work can also be very demanding, with challenges including high workload, working with animal owners and exposure to animal suffering. In recent years, increased pet ownership associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, public debate about the cost of veterinary care, and labour market shortages of veterinary professionals have added to the demands of working in the veterinary sector.

Stress occurs when a person feels that the work demands they face exceed their capacity to deal with the situation. It is important to highlight that stress differs from work demands that we experience as challenging but with which we believe we can cope (for example, a looming work deadline). Challenges like these can be considered a 'positive' form of stress (known as 'eustress') because they can be motivating and help us to achieve our goals.
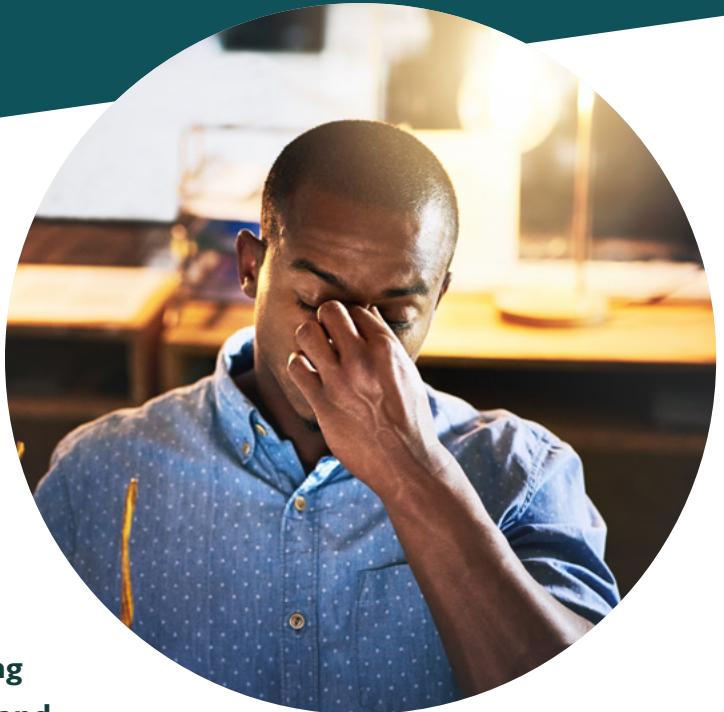
## Did you know?

Stress occurs when work demands exceed the person's ability to cope with the situation.

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**Sources of work stress vary across different sectors and jobs, but research by the** Health and Safety Executive[1] **has identified six principal types of work-related stressors**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Demands** | These include a range of job characteristics such as workload, working hours and working with clients. In veterinary work specifically, demands include euthanasia, the risk of making mistakes in animal treatment, and ethical dilemmas and potential moral injury. |
| **Relationships** | The quality of relationships among colleagues and clients, as well as the organisation's approach to supporting a positive working environment and dealing with any unacceptable behaviour. |
| **Support** | The extent to which colleagues provide practical help and emotional support to each other. |
| **Role** | This includes the extent to which people understand what their responsibilities are, and whether they have the required skills and experience to do their work well. |
| **Control** | How much autonomy people have in how their work is organised or carried out. |
| **Change** | The occurrence of change at work, as well as how change is managed by the organisation. |

The experience of work-related stress can be influenced by the intensity or frequency of a stressor, or by exposure to multiple stressors (including stressful events in our personal lives coinciding with difficult experiences at work). In addition, our personality characteristics and coping style influence how we respond to demanding situations at work and, in turn, the degree of stress we experience.

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# Why should work stress be addressed?



**The most recent** RCVS survey of the veterinary professions **carried out in 2024 found that, of those surveyed, 91% of veterinary surgeons and 93% of veterinary nurses agreed that their work is stressful**[2].

When we experience a situation as stressful, the body releases the hormone adrenaline, which causes a number of physical changes, including increased heart rate and respiration rate. This 'fight or flight' response evolved as a survival mechanism enabling humans to fight off or run away from physical threats to our safety, but it also occurs in response to experiences that we find psychologically unsettling or threatening. If stress at work occurs frequently or is prolonged, it can result in physical and psychological health problems.

The shorter-term effects of work-related stress include headaches, digestive problems, feelings of irritability or anxiety, and disturbance of sleep. In the longer term, stress can affect immune system function and cardiac health, and can increase the risk of anxiety and depressive disorders. Protracted stress can result in burnout, which is characterised by feelings of exhaustion, a sense of being less effective at work, and feeling detached from others. More information about the signs and symptoms of stress are available on the Mind website.

## Did you know?

Experiencing stress is not usually considered to be a mental health problem, but work-related stress is relevant for mental health in that it can cause or worsen mental health difficulties.

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## Did you know?

Employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) to protect the health of workers, which includes identifying and managing hazards to psychological wellbeing.

Effective stress management is important not only for workers' health and wellbeing, but there is also a clear business case for reducing work-related stress. Work stress can impair job performance and productivity, increase sickness absence, and affect staff retention.

**In Great Britain in 2023-2024, 16.4 million working days were lost to work-related stress, representing 55% of all working days lost to work-related ill-health[3].**

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# How can work stress be managed?

**There are two broad approaches to managing work-related stress.** Organisational interventions aim to change working arrangements to reduce or remove sources of stress, or to lessen their impact; examples include increasing staffing to address high workload or providing specialist training for those whose work involves contact with members of the public. Individual interventions seek to strengthen individuals' general resilience to stress or to develop their coping skills; one example is healthier lifestyle schemes that promote exercise and good diet. Individual interventions also include measures to support workers experiencing stress-related ill-health, such as counselling and return-to-work programmes.

It is often assumed that organisational interventions are more effective than individual interventions because they address the sources of work stress, with a focus on prevention rather than cure. In addition, individual interventions could be viewed as treating wellbeing at work as a personal rather than an organisational responsibility. There is research evidence from the human healthcare sector to support the effectiveness of organisational approaches to wellbeing at work[4]. However, individual interventions also have an important role to play given that some sources of work stress cannot be eradicated, for example working with demanding animal owners, as well as evidence that individual interventions can benefit wellbeing[5].

## Individual interventions

Some evidence-based – and accessible – individual approaches to managing stress are outlined below. Adopting just one or two of these that appeal to you can make a difference to your psychological wellbeing.

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- **Physical Movement:** Both aerobic activity and strength training are beneficial for stress management[6,] and regular physical activity can reduce anxiety and low mood[7]. Even brief, gentle physical movement can support wellbeing.

- **Yoga:** Yoga is helpful for stress management[8]. Similar activities, such as Tai Chi, may also be beneficial for wellbeing.

- **Breathing techniques:** Controlled breathing techniques can reduce feelings of stress and, when practised for a few minutes daily, promote general wellbeing[9]. Controlled breathing can also help you to sleep better. Details of controlled breathing techniques are available on the British Heart Foundation website.

- **Mindfulness:** Meditation techniques such as mindfulness are beneficial for stress management and support wellbeing. Several commercial mindfulness apps are available. For free-of-charge mindfulness resources, visit the Free Mindfulness Project website.

- **After-work recovery:** Unwinding from work during your non-work time is important for psychological health. Refraining from work-related activities and gaining 'mental distance' from work during non-work time is associated with better wellbeing and resistance to the impact of work stressors[10]. A video on after-work recovery in the context of veterinary work, including practical tips on how to enhance your recovery, is available on the WellVet website.

- **5 Ways to Wellbeing** is a summary of simple steps for improving your wellbeing at work and is available on the Mind website.

> "Controlled breathing techniques can reduce feelings of stress and, when practised for a few minutes daily, promote general wellbeing"

**For those experiencing higher levels of stress or symptoms of stress-related ill-health, additional support is recommended.**

- Employee assistance programmes (EAP) provide specialist support for a range of personal and work-related difficulties. Many organisations offer an EAP to their employees.

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- Vetlife provides advice and support on a range of matters, including work-related stress and wellbeing, to all in the veterinary community. This includes guidance for line managers on supporting colleagues experiencing poor wellbeing and those returning to work following health-related absence. Details are available on the Vetlife website.

## Organisational interventions

Organisational stress management interventions aim to change working arrangements or practices to reduce or remove sources of stress at work, or to lessen their impact on workers. To be effective, organisational interventions need to be tailored to the work setting. This means identifying potential sources of stress in your workplace, who they might affect, and deciding which approaches to targeting stress are most appropriate for your work setting.

With reference to the six categories of work stressors described earlier (see p5), some examples of organisational approaches to managing stress are outlined below.

## Work demands
**High workload and long working hours** are common features of veterinary work and have been compounded in recent years by increased demand for veterinary services and shortages of veterinary professionals. An important step in managing workload is to obtain accurate estimates of workload levels and to identify peak workload periods during the working day and week. Some principles for managing workload are:

- Scheduling a variety of tasks with differing physical and mental demands during the working day can help to maintain alertness and reduce fatigue. As far as possible, avoid scheduling demanding tasks when people are likely to be fatigued, for example at the end of the working day. Enabling people to have a say in scheduling their work tasks, if possible, can promote a sense of control, which is beneficial for wellbeing.
- Encourage breaks during the working day, when possible, and ensure that there are facilities for breaks to be taken away from the immediate place of work.
- An important responsibility of line managers is to monitor individual colleagues' workloads and if necessary, to revise their work allocations.

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**Shift work** involves work scheduled outside the hours of 7am to 7pm; rotating hours of work; work periods of 12 hours or more; or on-call duties. Shift work, particularly when it involves early-morning starts or working at night, can result in fatigue, disruption of personal life, and poorer wellbeing. Some best-practice guidelines for the design of shift work schedules are:

- When work demands concentration, is safety-critical, or involves exposure to physical hazards to workers' health, a shift should not exceed eight hours.
- Ensure a minimum of 11 hours off between the end of one shift and the start of the next.
- If people are switching from day to night shifts or vice versa, ensure that their work schedule incorporates a minimum of two nights' full sleep.
- Ensure schedules allow adequate rest time for those undertaking on-call duties. This is particularly important during periods when call-outs are more likely, such as lambing time.
- If colleagues are in the habit of swapping shifts, it is recommended that details are recorded and monitored to ensure that it is not resulting in insufficient rest time and an increased risk of fatigue.

Best-practice guidance on designing shift work schedules to minimise fatigue is available on the HSE website. For more information about rules around working time, please refer to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) website.

"Shift work, particularly when it involves early-morning starts or working at night, can result in fatigue, disruption of personal life, and poorer wellbeing"

**Lone working** involves a person working alone at their usual workplace (for example, during out-of-hours work) or other locations (for example, undertaking farm visits or house calls). Working alone, including travelling alone in remote areas, can be stressful if a person feels that they might not be safe or able to access help quickly in the event of an emergency. Guidance for organisations on lone-working safety is available on the HSE website.

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Commercial advice and training for organisations on lone-working safety are available from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust.

Jobs that involve interaction with clients/members of the public can require workers to deal with people who are upset, demanding, or abusive. In veterinary work, potential client-related stressors include animal owners' high expectations of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses; complaints; and exposure to verbal abuse or threatening behaviour.

- Consider having a single point of contact for responding to client complaints.
- Training in working with clients is recommended for those in veterinary workplaces who have direct contact with animal owners.
- Advice on addressing incivility in veterinary work, including working with clients who are discourteous, is provided in the Keeping it Civil guide, available on the University of Aberdeen website.
- Guidance on managing clients who are abusive or threatening is available on the HSE website.

**Relationships and social support at work**
**Difficulties or conflict in work relationships** can be a significant cause of work-related stress. Even when relationships among colleagues are courteous, **a lack of social support**, which refers to practical help and psychological support that colleagues provide to each other, can be a source of stress. Supportive relationships at work can also help people to cope better with other aspects of their job that they find stressful.

- Informal approaches to fostering social support at work are based on creating opportunities for people to spend time together and to develop relationships with each other. For example, ensuring that people can take breaks together during the working day enables them to be a source of support for each other. Holding social events outside work can help relationship building among colleagues. However, it is important that people do not feel obliged to participate in these events if they do not wish to do so. In addition, consider whether colleagues might feel excluded if personal commitments such as family responsibilities make it difficult for them to attend social events outside working hours.

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- Peer support schemes are a more formal approach to fostering support among colleagues; an example is holding debriefs, such as Schwartz Rounds, for clinical veterinary staff to discuss emotional or ethical issues arising in their work.
- Guidance on identifying and resolving difficulties among colleagues is provided in the keeping it civil guide, which has also been adapted for The RCVS Academy.
- Organisations should have clear policies stating that bullying and harassment at work are unacceptable and outlining how allegations of inappropriate behaviour will be managed. Guidance for organisations on addressing bullying and harassment is available on the ACAS website.

**Work roles**

**Work responsibilities that are unclear, conflict with each other, or exceed the person's capabilities** can be stressful. In addition, **lack of opportunities for professional development and career progression** can be a source of stress for some.

**Did you know?**

RCVS Academy has a range of courses on civility fundamentals, principles of delegation, mentoring and much more.

- Ensure that people know what is expected of them in terms of their responsibilities and required standards of performance. Build this into the induction process for new members of staff.
- Provide constructive feedback about performance; feedback is most effective when it is given in good time (namely, soon after a task is carried out) and is regular (for example, giving feedback only during an annual performance review might not be sufficient).
- Mentoring is beneficial for new or recently-qualified colleagues, but can also be helpful for those taking on new responsibilities, more senior roles, or returning to work after an extended period of absence.
- Veterinary workplaces usually provide funding and time for training in clinical and other work-related skills. It is important to address potential barriers to people undertaking professional training, such as very high workload or personal commitments such as family responsibilities.

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**Control at work and change at work**

- **Lacking a sense of control** at work is a common source of stress. Periods of **change at work** can create uncertainty and a sense of reduced control, leading to stress.

- There are many unavoidable constraints on how veterinary work is undertaken but, where possible, it is good practice for people to have a say in how their work is organised and carried out. If people's suggestions cannot be implemented, it is important that they understand the reasons for this.

- Good communication plays a role in people's sense of control at work and having a number of formal and informal communication channels in place is recommended. Communication channels should allow everyone to have a say, rather than solely being lines of 'top-down' communication from those in management positions. One caveat relating to communication is to encourage people to mute work-related group chat notifications outside their working hours to support detachment from work (see earlier discussion of after-work recovery in the 'Individual interventions' section).

- Change at work can be unsettling and stressful, particularly when it has significant implications for people's working arrangements or for their job security. Effective communication is fundamental to managing the impact of change at work. This includes tailoring the frequency of communication to match the significance of the change, and giving people opportunities to ask questions and discuss what is happening.

**Maximising the effectiveness of organisational interventions**

- As noted earlier, organisational interventions must be tailored to the specific workplace in terms of identifying what sources of stress might exist and implementing stress management initiatives that are appropriate for the work setting.

- Organisational interventions are more effective when colleagues are involved in the planning and implementation of wellbeing initiatives. This helps to identify sources of stress and potential ways of addressing them, and increases buy-in to associated changes in working arrangements. Furthermore, a participative approach to stress management can promote a sense of collective belonging and of control, both of which are beneficial for wellbeing.

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- Middle and senior management support for stress management initiatives is important to ensure that interventions are appropriately resourced and implemented.
- Individual workplaces evolve and change over time. Organisational stress management initiatives should be monitored to ensure that they continue to be relevant and effective.

Implementing organisational stress management interventions might appear to be challenging, particularly given that high workload in veterinary work can leave little time to identify and make changes to working arrangements. However, even one or two small changes to how work is organised can make a difference to psychological wellbeing, particularly when combined with workplace support for individual-level wellbeing initiatives. One example we have seen is a small animal practice that ensures colleagues have a common lunchtime and encourages them to eat away from their desks. Not only does this give people a break during the long working day, but it also enables them to offer a listening ear and be a source of support to each other.

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# Having a conversation with a colleague about their wellbeing

**If a colleague tells you that they are experiencing stress, or you suspect that they are, you might be unsure how to discuss it with them.** You might be concerned about saying 'the wrong thing'. However, you do not need to be an expert on psychological health to have a conversation with someone about their wellbeing. Some tips on how to do this are:

- If you are starting the conversation, a good way to begin is with a simple question such as 'how are you?' or 'you seem a bit anxious at the moment, are you OK?'. Not everyone who is experiencing stress will wish to discuss it, but asking can make it easier for people to disclose what is happening.
- Encourage the person to talk by asking short, simply-worded questions about what they are experiencing.
- Be prepared for the possibility of silences in the conversation and try to avoid 'filling' these. Phrases such as 'take your time' or 'this must be difficult to talk about' can help the person to continue.
- It is important to avoid making assumptions about what the person is experiencing or how it is affecting them, even if you have been in similar circumstances. Let the person explain what is happening.
- If you think it is appropriate, encourage the person to seek specialist advice and

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support, for example via a GP, NHS 111, a workplace EAP or occupational health service, or other mental health support organisations such as Vetlife.

If you are the line manager of the person experiencing difficulties, some additional points of advice are:

- Discuss with the person any practical support they might need, such as changes to their working arrangements or time away from work.
- Follow up your conversation with the person in writing, for example by email, including details of actions discussed and suggestions for specialist support.

### Suicidal thoughts

If someone tells you that they are experiencing thoughts of suicide, or if you suspect they might harm themself, you might feel very unsure about how to respond. A common worry is the possibility of saying something that increases the risk of the person harming themself.

Suicide prevention organisations advise that it is safer to talk about suicidal thoughts than not to talk about them. Clear, step-by-step guidance on how to have a conversation with someone experiencing suicidal thoughts is provided on the Grassroots Suicide Prevention website.

If you have a conversation with someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts, do consider seeking support for yourself afterwards.

- If you are a line manager or leader, consider implementing suicide awareness training for your team. Free training is available online on the Zero Suicide Alliance website.

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# The role of leaders and line managers in supporting wellbeing at work

**As a leader, you can make a valuable contribution to supporting psychological wellbeing in your workplace.** You can help to create a workplace culture that recognises the importance of wellbeing. You are also in a good position to notice signs of possible stress in colleagues. When people experience difficulties at work (or in their personal lives), support from their line managers can help to reduce the impact of these on their wellbeing.

- Maintain an open dialogue with colleagues about wellbeing at work and demonstrate that wellbeing matters. Examples might include encouraging colleagues to work sensible hours and to take breaks when possible.

- Familiarise yourself with wellbeing policies and support measures in place in your organisation, and highlight workplace wellbeing initiatives to colleagues.

- It is important to have regular one-to-one contact with colleagues. This can include informal conversations as well as organised meetings. Regular discussions with colleagues can help you to be aware of any difficulties they are experiencing that might have an impact on their wellbeing. In addition, establishing connections with your colleagues can make it easier for them to let you know if they are going through a difficult time.

- Consider the use of a Wellness Action Plan with those you manage. This is a personalised, practical tool everyone can use, whether or not they have a mental health

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problem, to help identify what keeps people well and how to address a mental health difficulty at work.

- Take care of your own wellbeing. Leadership roles and people management responsibilities can be demanding and can add to other sources of stress in your work. In addition, being seen to take care of your own wellbeing reinforces the message that wellbeing at work matters. For example, if you are in the habit of taking a break during the working day, it enables colleagues to feel that they too can take breaks.

- Additional practical advice for managers on supporting wellbeing at work, including discussing wellbeing with colleagues, can be found in Bupa's Open up at Work guide, available on Bupa's website.

**Have you seen our** funded research **that explored workplace stressors and mental wellbeing of veterinary surgeons in the UK with autism?**

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# Some final thoughts

**It is important that workplaces normalise wellbeing support and embed wellbeing initiatives as routine rather than supplementary to their main business activities.** To support wellbeing in your workplace, it is not necessary to implement all of the suggestions in this guide; selecting just two or three to follow can make a difference. We hope that you find the guide useful.

# How to feed back and contact RCVS Mind Matters

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we welcome feedback and suggestions for future updates to this guide.

**Registered Address:** 1 Hardwick Street, London  EC1R 4RB
**RCVS Website:** www.rcvs.org.uk
**MMI Website:** vetmindmatters.org
**Email:** Info@vetmindmatters.org

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# Resources

- Mind: Work and stress
- NHS Mindfulness
- Mental Health Foundation: How to support mental health at work publication

**For managers and leaders**
- HSE Stress Talk Toolkits
- HSE Stress Risk Assessments
- Wellness Action Plans
- ACAS Managing work related stress
- MHFA England Line Manager's Resource

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# Help & support

### General help and support

- Samaritans - available 24/7 and provides a safe place for anyone, whatever you are going through. Call 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.org
- Shout – available 24/7 and offers a free, confidential text messaging service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Text SHOUT to 85258
- If you need urgent help – call NHS 111 and select the mental health option or contact a GP Surgery and ask for an emergency appointment.
- If you are in crisis or need immediate medical help ring 999 and ask for an ambulance or visit your local A&E department.

### Veterinary specific help and support

- Vetlife Helpline – available 24/7 to listen and offer a confidential, safe, and non-judgmental space. Call 0303 040 2551 or visit https://helpline.vetlife.org.uk
- VetSupport - offers a confidential, empathetic, and non-judgmental listening ear across UK and Ireland. They also provide a confidential support service for those going through RCVS Professional Conduct Investigation process. Email info@vetsupport.me and they guarantee a reply within 24hrs.
- Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support - available 8.30am to 8.30pm every day and can offer support with pet bereavement (including veterinary professionals). You can call them on 0800 096 6606 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss if you'd like to talk.
- Cats Protection Paws to Listen Grief Support Service – available 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday (excl Bank Holidays) and offer a free and confidential helpline. They offer a sympathetic ear at a difficult time. Call them on 0800 024 94 94.
- British Horse Society (BHS) - BHS Friends at the End Initiative offers free confidential support to horse owners, carers, sharers and loaners before, during and after the death or loss of a horse. They are available 8.35am to 5pm Monday to Thursday and 8.35am to 3pm on Friday. You can call them on 02476 840517 or email fate@bhs.org.uk if you'd like to talk.

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# About the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

As the regulatory body and Royal College for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK, our mission is to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare, by upholding and advancing the educational, ethical, and clinical standards of the UK's veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

As a regulator, we set, uphold and advance veterinary standards in accordance with the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (VSA). As a Royal College, we promote, encourage and advance the study and practice of the art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine. We do all these things in the interests of animal health and welfare, and in the wider public interest. Our vision is to be recognised as a trusted, compassionate and proactive regulator, and a supportive and ambitious Royal College, underpinning confident veterinary professionals of whom the UK can be proud.

Mind Matters was set up in 2015, is funded and delivered by the RCVS, and supports the mental health of the veterinary community across all settings and career stages, through facilitating accessible, high-quality, and evidence-based mental health projects, research, content and events.

# About Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) was established in 1965 as one of the UK's first two business schools. AMBS is part of the University of Manchester and is the largest campus-based business and management school in the UK. Our brand ethos 'Original Thinking Applied' sits at the heart of everything we do. Ranked third in the UK for research power, our influential research impacts all areas of business and management. We provide world-class, industry-focused education to undergraduates, postgraduates and executives, and engage with businesses globally to share our expertise.