

# Tips for . . .

## Worried about a colleague?

WE'VE all had situations where we've worried about a colleague or have had someone worry about us. As an empathetic profession, connecting with and supporting others is part of our daily work, and that includes looking out for colleagues. Alongside concern around veterinary suicide rates, which are known to be three to four times the rate seen in the general population, we know veterinary professionals face other challenges to their wellbeing, such as workplace stress or mental health problems. Veterinary professionals often find it hard to ask for help, so how can we reach out and help when we are worried about someone?

### Take any distress seriously

There can be pressure in our industry – that we place upon ourselves or that we receive from others – to keep up a façade and not show that we are struggling. If someone is showing distress, or has noticeably changed in their demeanour, take it seriously.

### Ask how you can help

Choose a private space to talk to the colleague that you are concerned about. Start by asking them 'Are you OK?' or 'How are things?' Don't take it personally if they don't want to talk there and then; respect that, but say that you're there for them if and when they want to talk.

This monthly wellbeing series is provided by VDS Training. Topics are listed below:

- Knowing what you want from life ✓
- Managing perfectionism ✓
- Becoming responsibly selfish ✓
- Getting the most out of your time ✓
- Feeling in control ✓
- Setting achievable goals ✓
- Personal leadership ✓
- Developing a resilient approach ✓
- Developing an assertive approach ✓
- Dealing with difficult clients ✓
- Worried about a colleague? ✓
- Fulfilment at work ✓

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### Listen

Try listening to understand, rather than listening to speak. People may need time, space and more than one conversation to open up about how they are feeling. Showing empathy is crucial, especially trying to see their perspective regarding their concerns. Remember, you don't need answers or solutions in order to listen, you just need to be able to create a safe space to talk in.

### Avoid clichéd positivity

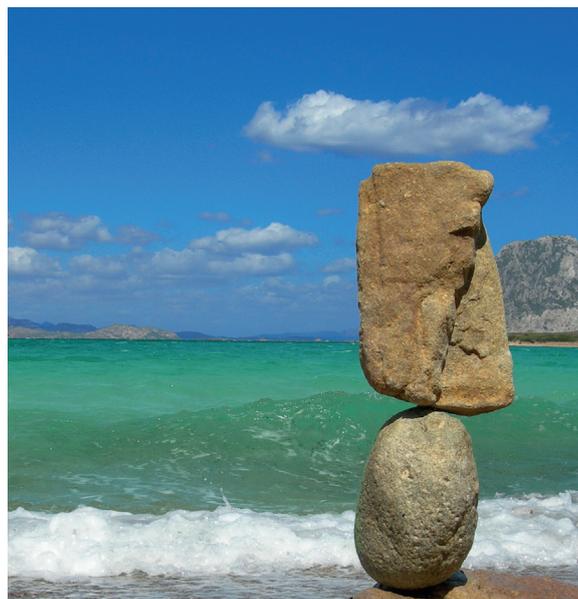
If someone is struggling, it's better to acknowledge that and to listen to how it feels for them, rather than to tell them to 'cheer up' or 'pull yourself together'.

### Be patient

Where possible, try to let the person stay in control and set their own pace for seeking help. It may take time, but let them know you're there for them and check in with them regularly. If you are their manager, then remember that you can get advice on how to handle the situation from occupational health.

### Provide support

Being heard and understood is sometimes all people want and can really help in improving their mood. However, there may also be times when they require professional advice or help; we should know our limits and not try to treat our colleagues (or ourselves) if that is the case. Organisations such as Vetlife Helpline and the Samaritans are available 24/7. Emergency departments and urgent GP services can also provide immediate support if required. If you are



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extremely worried, stay with the person while you make a plan with them about how they can get help.

### Look after you

To be able to support others effectively, we ourselves also need support. As colleagues, we can make a huge difference by being there for each other. Line managers have a particularly important role in workplace mental health, but it's also vital that they are well supported in that role.

### Provide signage

Does your practice or place of work have Vetlife stickers on the controlled drugs cupboard door and toilet door? There is evidence that a simple sign with a number to call for help, in places where people may be at risk, can reduce harm. Contact Vetlife at info@vetlife.org.uk and they can send some stickers free of charge. You could also suggest that everyone in your practice saves the Vetlife helpline number – 0303 040 2551 – on their mobile and work phones.

Sometimes people worry that asking how someone is might make things worse, but it's always better to ask and give someone the opportunity to talk, than not to. It could save a life. For more advice and to listen to discussions from Time to Talk Day (7 Feb 2019), with professionals from Vetlife, Mind Matters and VDS Training see: [bit.ly/timetotalkdiscussion](http://bit.ly/timetotalkdiscussion).