

Dealing with STRESS

It's a natural response, but something that can hold people back in their careers and everyday lives. **Vicki Leslie** explains how understanding what stress is and harnessing it can turn the tables...

It's probably fair to say that 2020 was a very stressful year for most vets and 2021 seems to be continuing the trend!

Not only were there the long hours, high work intensity and the emotions attached to caring for animals and their owners, but then a global pandemic created the need to work from home and closed businesses. It completely changed the way vets needed to work with remote video consultations and telephone triages becoming the norm.

This required different ways of working and being "COVID-safe" came with a whole new set of challenges. It all sounds so stressful and we often talk about "feeling stressed" but what is stress, what triggers it and how can we deal with it to help make sure we're not negatively impacted?

The Mental Health Foundation explains that stress is "our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event". Interestingly, factors contributing

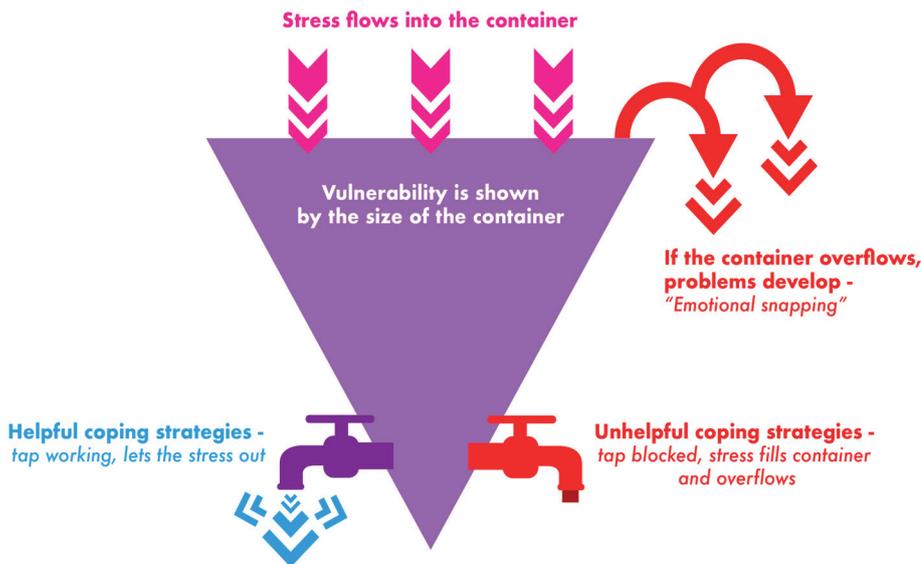
to stress are not all situational as our ability to tolerate stress is coded in our genetic make-up. Understanding this helps us to recognise that something we find relatively straightforward may be extremely stressful for someone else and *vice versa*.

It's also important to note that some stress can be beneficial. It helps drive us and keep us motivated. For peak performance, a degree of pressure is necessary for most people, otherwise we can get bored and unengaged.



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What's in your stress container?



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Put it in a box

One way to help us understand how we experience stress and to address our stress levels is to think of it as a "stress container" which represents a receptacle into which everyday stresses flow. Everybody's stress container is a different size based on different factors such as life experiences. When the container overflows, difficulties develop.

Helpful coping strategies can function as a tap to help let stress out of the container. These can be things such as asking for help, getting plenty of rest and taking time to do things which help you relax. Unhelpful coping methods such as working late or drinking alcohol, which we may think is helping us relax but could be doing the opposite, could block the tap and cause the container to overflow.

Our stress reactions were originally designed to protect us from hungry predators as opposed to worrying about being late for an important meeting; it's no wonder that the "fight or flight" response doesn't quite cut it anymore. Stress has evolved and

comes in many forms including physical, emotional and chronic stress.

Physical reactions to stress can include a low immune system which increases vulnerability to infection, gastric problems, musculoskeletal issues and skin conditions such as psoriasis.

Stress can also alter our behaviour. Stressed people are more likely to respond with anger or irritability which risks diminishing personal and professional relationships. In addition, prolonged exposure to stress can lead to formal mental health problems such as depression or anxiety disorders.

What can we do to reduce our stress levels? Pressured situations increase the level of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol in the body. Physical exercise can be used to metabolise excessive stress hormones and increase production of your brain's

feel-good neurotransmitters – endorphins.

You don't have to be an athlete or run miles every day to feel the benefits. One of the best forms of exercise is going out for a walk. No equipment is needed, apart from a good set of trainers, and you can burn 150 calories in 30 minutes.

Sleep is also a powerful stress reducer. A regular sleep routine helps calm the body and improves concentration, regulates mood and sharpens decision-making. To help get a good night's sleep, stop doing any mentally demanding work several hours before going to bed; give your brain time to calm down. Try relaxing in a warm bath or reading an undemanding book for a few minutes to relax your body, tire your eyes and help you forget about the things that worry you.

As much as many of us love that first cup of coffee in the morning, caffeine is a stimulant and will increase your level of stress rather than reduce it. We might need that first cup but throughout the day, try swapping it for water, squash or herbal infusions. Keeping hydrated also helps your body cope with stress. A glass of wine at the end of a busy day may seem appealing and make you feel less stressed, but alcohol can also increase feelings of anxiety so best avoided if it's been a stressful day.

We all have stress and it's a natural reaction to many things in our life. The important thing is to recognise when it starts to negatively impact us and take appropriate steps to look after our mental well-being.

Vicki Leslie has over 15 years' experience as a health and well-being specialist, having worked for a number of healthcare companies including Standard Life Healthcare and Bupa. Passionate about mental well-being and raising awareness of mental health, Vicki became a mental health champion and develops mental health workshops for companies to educate their employees.

