

## **A Somatic Approach to Well-Being: Part I**

*By Trudi Howley*

The results of a clinical study, “Suicide among Veterinarians in the USA from 1979-2015” (Journal of American Vet Med Association, 2019, Vol. 254), demonstrate that veterinarians have a higher risk factor than the general population for suicide. This study further calls for education around healthy work design and well-being concepts to prevent suicide, depression and burnout.

As a result, wellness initiatives geared towards veterinarians are now fueled by information about how to sleep better, meditate, eat healthily and exercise. These important long-term lifestyle suggestions can be best supplemented on a daily basis by an awareness of nervous system functioning. Managing the daily stressors of being an equine veterinarian is crucial to mitigating the risk factors of working in this challenging environment.

Incorporating the vocabulary of the nervous system and understanding how to practice body awareness can quickly decrease stress responses and ultimately become a part of preventing occupational stress. Attending to body awareness becomes similar to the experience of assessing the non-verbal equine patient simply by becoming efficient at reading the overall physical presentation of the animal.

As emergency responders, veterinarians at times need to communicate bad news with stressed horse owners. This factor—in addition to caring for a diversity of equine patient’s needs, working in difficult conditions out in the field, perhaps feeling overwhelmed by an unusual daily quantity of cases such as colics or euthanasias, and even feeling unappreciated by bosses in a large practice—can be among the causes of daily stress. Long working hours and student debt can also contribute to work-life imbalances. Any one of these types of stressors can be layered upon prior or existing negative personal life events and current health conditions with a potential to cause accumulative chronic psycho-biological stress.

### **Vicarious trauma**

Risks factors for veterinarians also include experiencing psychological effects of vicarious trauma. The concept of vicarious trauma evolved in clinical literature when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was shown in symptoms related to emergency responders. Most veterinarians are exposed to demanding and insidious long-term psychological effects of witnessing accumulative suffering in their clinical work. Not all experiences of trauma result in development of a traumatic stress response. However, beneath every trauma there exists a loss of something which usually results in grief. Grief or sadness may be healthily felt or it can remain unresolved, unexpressed or buried in the nervous system. Compound this with multiple exposures and a limited amount of training in veterinary programs related to dealing with exposure to traumatic events, and the practitioner is put at risk of PTSD.

Though the veterinarian may be trained to administer emergency medical treatment, this does not necessarily include preparedness to deal with its emotional impacts. The problem of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma can be managed if the veterinarian is aware of its associated patterns. Paying attention to how a practitioner may demonstrate trauma related and somatic

symptoms such as black and white-thinking, emotional numbness, dissociation, anger, frustration, digestive problems, insomnia, shortness of breath, heart racing, headaches, syndromal body pains, fatigue or substance use can help identify those in need of help. Early recognition of such symptoms can eventually lead to veterinarians reaching out for support from peers, getting comfortable seeking counseling, and implementing new coping strategies.

### **Bringing the nervous system into balance**

One important beginning piece to the implementation of better wellness and body awareness strategies is the simple act of acknowledging how you are feeling internally. Just by doing this can help take the potency out of any heightened arousal states. What, if any, emotional extremes might you be experiencing today? Be honest and notice them by simply naming them to yourself, a friend or your partner. As psychotherapist Diane Poole Heller points out, the ability to develop presence and relaxation in the relational field begins in the body.

### **Tracking ANS activation**

Attending to the nervous system and body, being in touch with somatic (bodily & nervous system) sensations, allows for engagement in the present moment with the self and ultimately the equine as patient and the paying clients. Peter Levine Ph.D., is the founder of Somatic Experiencing® (SE™), a body-oriented approach to the healing of trauma and other stress disorders. Dr. Levine developed this clinical methodology from exploration of why animals in the wild are not traumatized by routine threats to their lives, while humans, on the other hand, are readily overwhelmed and often subject to the traumatic symptoms of hyper arousal, shutdown and dysregulation. He explains in his book *An Unspoken Voice* (2010) how the complex systems of the brain and the nervous system can be viewed like a marriage, “in either blissful harmony or in dreadful unending battle” (p.123).

The ANS is made up of two branches: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Vicarious trauma expert, Babette Rothschild states, “They function in balance to promote survival of the individual and maintain homeostasis in the body” (2006, p.98).

These two branches both work at the same time, much like the delicate interplay of the gas and brake pedal in a vehicle. Physical responses to stress are normally triggered by the activation of the sympathetic nervous system; this fight/flight response kicks in and the person is ready for action or reaction to what the body perceives as a danger. During this mobilization or defense response the heart rate will increase, the eyes and hearing will narrow in their focus, breathing will become faster and shallower, and blood flows to the major muscle groups. The PNS is responsible for the rest and digest process and through the vagus nerve sends relaxation responses back and forth directly between the gut and the brain. Bodily functions are working well, breathing is steady, muscles are relaxed, and it feels safe to make easy connections with other beings. Learning to track these autonomic responses allows for the interception and deliberate decrease or increase of arousal states as needed, limiting the risks of getting stuck in a chronic state of threat or apathy.

Adverse health and psychological conditions can occur when physical responses are ignored, or arousal states are either too low or too active for extended periods of time. Extreme nervous

system overload can then occur. Excessive overwhelm may lead to collapse or exhaustion, with a sense of numbing, dissociation or shutdown. When this becomes chronic, it may lead to depression or unhealthy coping behaviors such as substance use. In extreme cases, veterinarians who are trained to recognize hopeless cases may believe that suicide is the only choice.

### **Resolving chronic states of high alert**

Veterinarians can become as attuned with themselves as they are with their patients. This can be done by learning simple skills towards developing their own sensory integration. Somatic theories can be used to help achieve this type of sensory integration. Sensory integration occurs when incomplete self-defensive and protective responses to existing stress or past trauma no longer block energies in the body and, consequently, the mind.

Sometimes basic cognitive therapy techniques help people to relax and calm themselves but do not address the underlying causes of repetitive anxiety or physical symptoms. Quick fixes for better stress management become possible if the professional intentionally slows down, plans to optimally use brief windows of time and pays attention to the sensory information of their bodies throughout the day. Self-reflective noticing of what state the nervous system is in, a freeze/immobilized state, activated in fight or flight, functioning in a calm relaxed state can help in knowing when moments of nervous system relief are needed. This can be done by putting on the brakes during extreme overload or deliberately decreasing chronic shutdown by inviting gentle movement into the day or reaching out through social engagement with others.

Building this type of somatic self-awareness then complements cognitive approaches to wellness and can be a valuable precursor to developing feel for managing both professional work and personal relationships. Incorporating some basic somatic practices can provide a new way of approaching stress tolerance effectively by creating moments of relief throughout the day.

*Trudi Howley M.S., SEP, CPC is a lifelong equestrian, Somatic Psychotherapist, Certified Professional Coach, and US Dressage Federation Silver medalist. She specializes in resolving trauma, solution-focused coaching, and wellness. Trudi can be reached at [info@inscapequest.com](mailto:info@inscapequest.com). Somatic practitioners can be found at [www.traumahealing.org](http://www.traumahealing.org) National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8355); [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)*