



Preventing burnout in veterinary practice teams: *a step-by-step guide*

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Burnout in the veterinary profession is a pressing issue with over half of UK veterinarians reporting moderate to high burnout levels. Long hours, emotional strain and intense workload pressures are common culprits.

This guide provides practical, evidence-based steps for veterinary practice managers to help prevent burnout in their teams. It draws on the latest research and best practices (as of 2025) and highlights UK specific resources and initiatives.

Each step includes actionable strategies and tools that practice leaders can implement to foster a healthier, more resilient team.

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Step 1: Recognise the signs and risk factors of burnout

Early recognition is critical. Burnout is a gradual process that can manifest physically, emotionally, and behaviourally. It often begins with chronic exhaustion, detachment or cynicism, declining performance, or frequent mistakes. However, the signs can be more extensive and subtle.

Common symptoms include:

- **Physical:** Persistent fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, muscle pain, gastrointestinal issues, and frequent illness due to lowered immunity.
- **Emotional:** Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or being trapped; loss of motivation; increased irritability or mood swings; and emotional numbness.
- **Behavioural:** Withdrawal from responsibilities or social interactions, procrastination, reduced productivity, increased absenteeism or lateness, and reliance on substances like alcohol, food, or drugs to cope.
- Related issues such as **compassion fatigue** (emotional exhaustion from caring for others in distress) and moral injury (distress from ethical dilemmas, such as economic euthanasia) can further erode wellbeing.

Ensure you and your team are equipped to identify these warning signs early to prevent burnout from becoming overwhelming.



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Step 2: Take action to support mental health and prevent burnout

Recognising the signs is only the first step. Proactive strategies are essential to protect team wellbeing and create a supportive work environment:

- **Prioritise mental health training for your team**

Learn the common indicators of burnout and compassion fatigue. For example, signs may include increased absenteeism (e.g. calling in sick frequently), withdrawal from colleagues or clients, irritability, or declining job satisfaction.

- **Open dialogue**

Foster a culture where team members feel safe to speak up about stress and mental health. Encourage informal check-ins and discussions about wellbeing. Let your team know that it's okay to feel overwhelmed and that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. For example, during staff meetings or one-to-ones, ask how your staff are coping and genuinely listen to their concerns.

- **Use surveys or assessments**

Consider anonymous wellbeing surveys or burnout assessment tools to gauge team stress levels. This can provide a baseline and help identify specific problem areas (e.g. workload, client-related stress). The RCVS Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) and Vetlife have resources on identifying burnout and mental ill-health in veterinary teams

- **Signpost to professional support**

If signs of stress or burnout are identified, consider carrying out a stress risk assessment to identify exact areas of their role causing stress <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>

Why this matters:

Recognising burnout early allows you to take proactive steps before it escalates. According to research, workload and time pressure are the top reported causes of burnout among vets. By acknowledging these risks openly, you set the stage for targeted interventions.



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Step 3: Manage workload and staffing levels

Managers should proactively manage workloads to ensure no one is chronically overburdened:

- Assess and adjust appointment scheduling**
 Avoid overpacking the schedule with back-to-back consultations and surgeries without breaks. Ensure there is buffer time for writing up notes, returning calls, and handling emergencies.
- Enforce regular breaks**
 Make it standard that everyone takes their lunch and short breaks to recharge. Consider scheduling 5-10-minute breathers between consultation blocks. A practice where staff skip meals or work 10 hours straight is a recipe for burnout. Simple changes like mandating a proper lunch break can improve energy and reduce errors.
- Optimal staffing and delegation**
 Evaluate if your practice is adequately staffed for the caseload. It may be cost-effective in the long run to hire an extra veterinary nurse to redistribute tasks and relieve pressure. Delegate tasks appropriately - e.g. allow nurses/technicians to handle routine follow-ups or lab tests, use support staff for administrative duties so vets can focus on critical clinical work.
- Leverage technology and efficiency tools**
 Streamline workflows to save team time. Use practice and staff management software, appointment triage systems, or consider AI-powered scribe tools for note-taking. Even small improvements (templates for common cases, voice dictation software, etc.) can reduce the daily time crunch.
- Set realistic client expectations**
 Communicate clearly to clients about turnaround times and emergency protocols so that your team isn't squeezed by unrealistic demands. For example, implement a policy for emergencies (if you're swamped, have a system to refer non-critical cases to the next day or another provider). When clients understand that your team won't always be immediately available 24/7, it helps protect staff from undue pressure.



By actively managing workload, you tackle the number one burnout driver. Remember: It's better to occasionally turn away or reschedule a non-urgent appointment than to consistently overwork your team at the expense of their health and patient safety.

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Step 4: Support work-life balance (encourage time off and boundaries)

A healthy work-life balance is essential in preventing burnout. Veterinary work can easily spill into personal time so managers must set policies that protect employees' time away from work:

- **Respect "off" hours**

Establish clear boundaries that when staff are off-duty or on holiday, they are truly off. Avoid contacting team members outside of work hours except for real emergencies. Encourage a no after-hours email rule or use delayed sending so emails arrive during work hours. If your practice uses WhatsApp or similar for communication, make it explicit that no one is obliged to respond when off.

- **Encourage use of annual leave**

Ensure your team takes their holidays. Many veterinary staff don't use their full annual leave due to guilt or workload which is a fast track to burnout. Set an example by taking your own holidays and positively reinforce others doing the same. Consider scheduling rotations or cross-training so staff can take time off without worrying about burdening colleagues.

- **Provide mental health days or "duvet days"**

Some practices offer wellbeing days or duvet days to support employee mental health and wellbeing. This acknowledges that mental wellbeing is as important as physical health.

Additionally, allow flexibility for important personal events – a supportive approach to life outside work builds loyalty and reduces stress.

- **Wellness and self-care initiatives**

Implement work-life balance programs. For example, you might arrange wellness activities (group yoga session, step-count challenges, or bring in a massage therapist periodically). Larger practices might offer gym discounts or cycle to-work schemes. Even low-cost ideas like a quiet break room with comfortable chairs, free healthy snacks, or a weekly team walk can encourage staff to recharge during the workday.



- **Discourage “presenteeism” (working while ill or on days off)**

Foster a culture where personal health comes first. If someone is unwell, they should stay home without feeling guilt. BVA’s Good Veterinary Workplaces code emphasises that personal health and safety take precedence over professional duty and rejects any “pushing through illness” culture.

- **Management tip: develop a clear time-off policy and communicate it**

Commit to not booking routine appointments past a certain hour to allow everyone to leave on time. Remind clients of your working hours and have a protocol for out-of-hours emergencies (e.g. an on-call rotation) so that emergency duty doesn’t fall on one person continuously. Practices that proactively promote work-life balance see improved staff morale and retention.

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Step 5: Introduce flexible scheduling options

Offering flexible working arrangements is a powerful way to reduce burnout and improve team satisfaction. Many vets (especially those with families or other commitments) value flexibility as highly as salary. Consider how your practice can implement flexible scheduling without compromising patient care:

- **Rotas and part-time opportunities**

Where possible, accommodate requests for part-time roles, job shares, or adjusted hours. For example, allow a working parent to do four longer days instead of five, or have early vs. late shifts to stagger the day. Keep experienced staff in the profession by offering maternity/parental leave and return-to-work flexibility, or even semi-retirement roles that let older vets work reduced hours. Practices should strive to keep talented team members by modifying roles to their life needs, rather than forcing one rigid schedule.

- **Flexible shift patterns**

Implement a fair rota for evenings, weekends, and on-call duty. Rotate emergency on-call responsibilities so no individual is always on call. If you’re a small practice, consider pooling on-call with a neighbouring clinic or using a third-party out-of-hours service to give everyone regular nights/weekends off. This prevents fatigue and demonstrates you value your staff’s personal time.

- **Compressed or alternative workweeks**

Some practices offer a 4-day workweek (with longer shifts) to grant a weekday off, or other arrangements like 9-day fortnights. These can reduce burnout by giving an extra rest day. Always ensure any compressed schedule still permits adequate breaks during the longer days.

- **Scheduling buffer and coverage**

Flexibility isn't just about individual preference; it's also about being adaptable when life happens. Build some slack into the rota for unexpected absences or high workload days. For instance, have a locum vet or a "floating" nurse on standby who can cover when someone is off sick or when there's a surge in cases. This way, others aren't forced to overextend themselves to cover gaps.

- **Employee input in scheduling**

Involve your team in designing the rota. People are more committed to a schedule they had a say in. Use anonymised surveys or meetings to discuss scheduling preferences or pain points. Often, creative solutions emerge (e.g. one vet prefers early mornings and another doesn't mind late evenings - you can align shifts accordingly). Clear processes for suggesting changes help staff feel heard and valued.

Flexible scheduling shows your team that you trust and respect them as individuals. Even small accommodations (like occasionally swapping a shift to let someone attend a family event) can build goodwill and reduce stress. The payoff is a more motivated staff with a better work-life fit.

Remember, flexibility should be balanced with fairness. Ensure it doesn't always fall to the same people to cover undesirable shifts and that everyone's needs are considered.

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Step 6: Foster a supportive team culture and environment

Workplace culture has a profound impact on burnout. A positive, supportive environment can buffer stress, whereas a toxic culture will amplify it. As a manager, focus on building a team culture where wellbeing is a priority:

- **Psychological safety**

Create an atmosphere of trust where team members feel safe to admit mistakes, ask questions, or express concerns without fear of blame or ridicule. When staff know they won't be belittled for an error, they are more likely to speak up early, seek help, and prevent issues from snowballing.

- **Zero tolerance for bullying**

Unfortunately, bullying and cliques can occur in high-stress veterinary workplaces, contributing to burnout among victims. Make it clear that disrespectful or dismissive behaviour is not acceptable. "Be kind" should be a core clinic rule. Address conflicts or reports of rude or disrespectful behaviour promptly and fairly. Consider providing training or resources on conflict resolution. Research shows that incivility at work increases stress and the risk of burnout, as well as jeopardising patient safety. Tackling even low-level rudeness can therefore have big benefits for team morale.

- **Open communication and voice**

Encourage open feedback across all levels. All team members, from vets to receptionists, should feel their input is valued. Set up channels for suggestions (e.g. an anonymous suggestion box or regular team huddles) and act on good ideas. The BVA's Good Workplace guidelines highlight having clear processes for staff to make suggestions and be heard as a hallmark of a healthy culture. When people feel heard and included in decisions, it boosts engagement and reduces frustration.

- **Peer support and camaraderie**

Facilitate team cohesion. Simple practices like morning roundups or end-of-week debriefs can help the team support each other. Consider implementing a buddy system where team members pair up to check in on one another, or schedule periodic team lunches/outings to build relationships outside of stressful clinical tasks. A strong support network at work means employees turn to each other in tough times instead of feeling alone. Some practices even start peer discussion groups or "Schwartz Rounds" (reflective sessions to talk about emotional cases) to help staff process tough experiences together.

- **Recognition and appreciation**

Make it routine to acknowledge hard work and celebrate small wins. Thank your team or individual staff when they go above and beyond. Celebrate birthdays, work anniversaries, or successful cases. A positive workplace that celebrates successes and offers praise can counterbalance the stress of the job. It doesn't need to be expensive. A shout-out in the team meeting or a quick e-mail of appreciation from a manager can boost morale significantly.



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Step 7: Strengthen leadership practices and lead by example

By cultivating a supportive, inclusive culture, you create a safety net for your team's mental health. Staff who feel respected and part of a team are more likely to confide in each other about challenges, seek help early, and stick with the practice through hard times. Investing effort into your practice's culture is therefore a direct investment in your team's wellbeing and retention.

The behaviour and attitudes of leaders and managers set the tone for the whole practice. To prevent burnout in your team, lead in a way that prioritises wellbeing:

- **Model healthy habits**

Leadership by example is powerful. If practice owners or senior vets regularly work 12-hour days, never take holidays, or skip lunch, junior staff will feel pressure to do the same. Instead, demonstrate balance by leaving on time whenever possible, take breaks, and “stop being the first in and last out of the door”. By visibly caring for your own wellbeing, you give your team permission to do likewise. Conversely, if you send emails at midnight or come in sick, employees get the message that they're expected to sacrifice self-care, which fosters burnout.

- **Be approachable and listen**

Create regular opportunities for one-on-one check-ins or informal chats where staff can voice concerns or personal challenges. When someone does bring an issue, take it seriously and work on solutions together. Practice managers should maintain an open-door policy – or in a busy practice, an “open-ear policy” – to ensure staff know you will listen without judgment or reprisal. As highlighted at a recent VMG conference, leaders must actively listen when team members raise concerns about workload or workplace conditions. Even if immediate fixes aren't possible, feeling heard can greatly reduce a team member's stress.

- **Provide feedback and mentorship**

Good leadership means guiding your team's growth. Regularly provide constructive feedback and also seek feedback on your management. If a vet is struggling with surgical load, for



example, acknowledge it and offer mentorship or adjust their schedule to include training time. Helping staff build confidence and skills can mitigate burnout stemming from feeling “not good enough” or unsupported.

- **Fairness and transparency**

Trust in leadership buffers against burnout. Be transparent about decisions (where possible) and ensure workload, rotas, and opportunities are distributed fairly to avoid resentment. If everyone sees that on-call duties, CPD opportunities, etc., are allocated fairly, it reduces stress and conflict. Have clear anti-discrimination and bullying policies and enforce them impartially even if the perpetrator is a top performer or a senior figure.

- **Train and educate leaders**

Consider formal training for yourself and other team leaders on management and mental health awareness. The veterinary profession often promotes people to management based on clinical skill, but leadership skills are learned. Invest in courses on leadership, communication, and mental health first aid. Such training gives leaders tools to recognise staff in distress and respond effectively. Likewise, leadership CPD can teach techniques in coaching, conflict resolution, and team motivation specifically tailored to vet practice settings.

Strong, empathetic leadership is a cornerstone of a resilient veterinary team. When leaders demonstrate empathy and balance, employees feel more comfortable setting boundaries and prioritising self-care. Also, managers who actively support their staff’s well-being (through listening, mentorship, and fair practices) will find that their team is more loyal, engaged, and productive. As industry experts note, practice leaders have immense influence in creating a culture where taking breaks is encouraged, not frowned upon – use that influence to shape a healthier workplace.



Step 8: Provide mental health support and resources

Even with all the preventive measures above, some team members may struggle with their mental health. It’s vital to offer support and professional resources for those in need and to normalise using them:

- **Promote veterinary support services**

Make sure your team is aware of confidential support like Vetlife, which offers a 24/7 helpline and email service for anyone in the veterinary community. Post the Vetlife Helpline number (0303 040 2551) in the staff room and include it in staff handbooks or newsletters. Emphasise that Vetlife is free and confidential - it’s there to listen to anything from stress and burnout to financial worries. Vetlife Health Support can also connect vets/vet nurses with professional mental health

services, such as counselling or addiction treatment, via trained volunteers. Importantly, practice managers themselves are welcome to contact Vetlife for advice on helping a staff member or for their own support.

- **Mind Matters Initiative (MMI)**

The RCVS Mind Matters Initiative provides a range of mental health resources tailored to the vet profession. This includes workshops, webinars, and courses on resilience, mindfulness, and even specific issues like managing incivility and building psychological safety in practice teams. Engage with MMI – for example, by hosting a viewing of an MMI webinar on wellness at a team meeting, or encourage interested staff to attend MMI’s trainings (often low-cost or free).

- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)**

If feasible, consider setting up an EAP for your practice (some insurance or HR providers offer EAP packages even to small businesses). An EAP gives employees access to counselling, legal, or financial advice services confidentially. While Vetlife covers many of these needs for free, an EAP that includes counselling sessions or helpline can be another safety net, especially for non-clinical staff or family members who might not be eligible for Vetlife.

- **Mental health first aid and champions**

Identify team members who are passionate about mental health and sponsor them to become Mental Health First Aiders. Having a trained Mental Health First Aider in the practice means there is someone equipped to spot early signs of struggle and signpost to help. Even without formal titles, you can designate a wellbeing champion on the team who organises small wellness activities and keeps mental health on the agenda.

- **Resources and literature**

Keep readily accessible resources in the clinic. This might include brochures from Vetlife or Mind, posters about coping strategies, or simply a shelf of books on stress management in the staff room. Sharing articles or blog posts (e.g. from BVA, Vet Times, or Vet Nurse journals) on dealing with stress can validate your team’s experiences and show them strategies.

- **External professional help**

Encourage team members to seek professional help when needed, without stigma. Have a list of local counsellors or therapists who understand healthcare/ veterinary work. If an employee is very affected, gently suggest they speak to their GP for advice. Ensure your sick leave policies cover mental health – i.e. employees can take time off for counselling or mental recovery as they would for a physical illness.

Most importantly, make mental health an ongoing conversation, not a one-off. Managers should routinely remind staff that resources exist and it’s okay to use them. For example, during Stress Awareness month or World Mental Health Day, you might invite a speaker or just openly discuss self-care tips. The goal is for your team to feel that seeking support is normal and encouraged. By destigmatising mental health and providing clear avenues for help, you can catch burnout and related issues early, potentially preventing tragedies and improving overall job satisfaction.

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Step 9: Continuously monitor, adjust, and sustain wellbeing practices

Burnout prevention is not a one-time project but an ongoing commitment. Ensure you regularly evaluate how your interventions are working and be ready to adapt:

- **Regularly reassess team wellbeing**

Every few months, take the pulse of your practice's morale. This can be through informal conversations, regular staff surveys, or incorporating wellbeing as a standing agenda item in team meetings. Look at objective measures too, e.g. any changes in staff turnover, sick leave frequency, or error rates can signal how the team is coping.

- **Invite feedback on initiatives**

Ask your team which measures have helped and what else they need. Perhaps your attempt at an afternoon yoga class flopped, but staff really appreciated the buffer time to complete reports. Maybe the new schedule is working generally, but nurses feel their workload is still too high on surgery days. Use this feedback to fine-tune your strategies. A culture of continuous improvement shows staff that management truly cares and is responsive.

- **Celebrate and share successes**

When you find something that works (even a small win, like “since we started scheduling 15-minute buffers, we’ve all been leaving on time more often”), acknowledge it and congratulate the team. This reinforces positive changes and keeps momentum. Consider sharing your practice's wellbeing initiatives with wider networks— for instance, some practices enter wellbeing awards or write case studies (the BVA Wellbeing Awards celebrate workplaces that excel in staff wellbeing). The recognition can boost team pride and motivate everyone to uphold the standards.



- **Stay informed**

Keep up with new research and resources on veterinary mental health. The conversation around burnout in veterinary medicine is evolving, and new ideas continue to emerge (e.g. recent studies on four-day work weeks, or the concept of “moral injury” in vets). Follow UK veterinary associations (BVA, RCVS, VMG) and journals for updates. For example, the RCVS Mind Matters research symposiums and grants (2024–25) focus on topics like veterinary occupational stressors and suicide prevention. These insights could inform your policies. Being an informed leader means you can proactively bring in fresh, evidence-backed interventions.

- **Lead a long-term culture shift**

Finally, aim to embed wellbeing into your practice’s identity. Make it as much a priority as clinical excellence or customer service. This might involve writing wellness principles into your mission statement or employee handbook, training new hires on self-care and team support expectations, and budgeting each year for wellbeing (be it for training, team-building activities, or simply closing for an extra day after a busy season). When burnout prevention is part of “how we do things here,” it will outlast any single manager and become self-sustaining.

Preventing burnout is challenging but achievable with persistent effort and genuine commitment. By taking the steps above, you can create a practice environment where veterinary professionals feel supported, balanced, and engaged, ultimately benefiting not only your team’s health, but also the quality of care you deliver to patients and clients. Remember, healthy and happy veterinary teams are better equipped to handle the inevitable stresses of the profession. Investing in your people is investing in the future success of your practice.

Key resources

1. Vetlife Helpline

24/7 confidential support for everyone in the veterinary community (call 0303 040 2551 or email via their website). They also offer financial aid and a Health Support service for professional mental health referrals. www.vetlife.org.uk

2. RCVS Mind Matters Initiative (MMI)

RCVS-run programme providing mental health training, courses (e.g. Civility in Practice, Mental Health First Aid), research, and resources for vet teams. www.vetmindmatters.org

3. BVA Good Veterinary Workplaces Code

Guidance from the British Veterinary Association on improving workplace culture, covering health & wellbeing, teamwork, and more. Info:BVA Good Workplaces (includes webinars and tips on stress management).

4. Vet Support NI / Vet Support Scotland

Peer support networks offering local assistance, mentorship and mental health first aid to vets and vet nurses in Northern Ireland and Scotland. They complement Vetlife by providing region-specific help (find via vetsupportni.co.uk).

5. British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) Wellbeing Resources

The BVNA offers a Chronic Illness Toolkit and wellbeing guidance for veterinary nurses, which can be useful for managers to understand supporting staff with long-term health issues.

6. Veterinary Management Groups (VMG) and SPVS

These organisations often run workshops or publish articles on practice wellbeing and HR management. The VMG Congress 2025 introduced new burnout resources (like the Vetlife guide) – attending such conferences or networking can provide new ideas and support.

7. Professional Help: Don't hesitate to involve external professional help for your team.

Occupational health consultants or psychologists with experience in veterinary stress can deliver in-practice seminars or one-on-one support. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) can guide on professional support and has a confidential careline via Vetlife.

By utilising these resources and following the steps outlined above, practice leaders can make great strides in preventing burnout and nurturing a practice environment where veterinary professionals thrive. The wellbeing of your team is not a luxury, it is as crucial to the success of your practice as any medical equipment or clinical protocol. Prioritising it is an investment in everyone's future.

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