Partner Veterinary
EMERGENCY & SPECIALTY CENTER

Find a Way to Stay: Building a Sustainable Career in Veterinary Medicine

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The Path Less Traveled



My Background



Veterinary Medicine Is Getting Tougher

67%

of U.S. homes have a pet, up from 56%

~50%

of credentialed technicians leave the field within five years

~17K

projected shortage of veterinarians by 2032

40–50%

of patients seen in practice are now seniors

More pets, treated as family (85–97% of owners), living longer (dogs +12%, cats +15%) — cared for by fewer people.

Sources: APPA; IDEXX (2010–2023)

Challenges Across the Whole Team

Debt vs. pay

Educational debt that outpaces income, for DVMs and credentialed technicians alike

Staffing gaps

Every vacancy adds workload and training burden to the people who stay

Emotional load

Euthanasia, cost-of-care conversations, and difficult clients, every shift

Hours and balance

Long shifts, on-call, and missed breaks squeeze life outside work

Underutilization

Skilled technicians not working at the top of their training

Leaders in the middle

Practice managers absorb pressure from the team, owners, and clients

Find a Way to Stay: Lessons from the Trenches

1. Prioritize continued learning and mentorship
2. Protect your wellbeing, health, and balance
3. Develop strong communication skills
4. Continue to evolve
5. Focus on impact and purpose



Prioritize Continued Learning and Mentorship

Where to learn

- Associations: state VMAs, NAVTA, VHMA, specialty groups
- CE, conferences, and networking
- Advanced credentials: residency, VTS, CVPM
- Employer support: CE allowance, tuition, protected time

How to grow

- Find people already in the role you want next
- Bring in outside perspective, from consultants and other industries
- Become a mentor: teaching locks in learning
- Leaders: put mentorship in writing for every new hire

Be okay being out of your comfort zone. That's where growth happens.

Protect Your Wellbeing, Health, and Balance

Health first

Sleep, movement, and real meals go back on the front burner.

Clear boundaries

Know your hours, on-call expectations, and time off, and use them.

A life outside work

Make time for the hobbies and people that refill you.

For leaders: model it. Take your PTO, protect breaks in the schedule, and let the team see you do it.

Build Resilience and Gratitude

Recognize the signs of burnout and compassion fatigue early. Don’t wait for a crisis.

Emotional resilience

- Cognitive reframing of difficult cases
- Emotional regulation under pressure
- Self-compassion

Gratitude

Lowers stress and depressive symptoms, reinforces purpose

- “Good things” reflection after each shift
- Thank teammates for specific contributions
- Recognition boards and shout-outs
- Gratitude journals
- Celebrate good case outcomes

Build a Supportive Network

Family	Friends
Colleagues	Mentors
Professional organizations	Volunteer or special-interest work

Who in your life is invested in your success?



The Power of Culture



Assessing the Culture

Read the environment

- People help without being asked
- Laughter and lightness
- Solutions over blame
- Respect across roles
- Questions are welcome



Questions to ask

- What happens after a difficult case?
- How are medical mistakes handled?
- How are new team members supported? Is it written down?
- What's your favorite part of working here?
- Does the team feel supported?

Leaders: could your team answer these well?

Stress vs. Overwhelm

Stress

“I have a lot to do.”

- Pressure, urgency, tension
- Brain activated and engaged
- Can prioritize and take action
- Deadlines and responsibilities

Overwhelm

“I can’t handle this.”

- Mentally flooded or shut down
- Brain goes into freeze mode
- Hard to start or prioritize
- Even small tasks feel like too much

Stress vs. Overwhelm: What It Looks Like

Stress

- Double-booked schedule
- Many hospitalized patients
- Running behind
- Stacked client callbacks
- Difficult clients
- Two call-outs on a busy shift

Overwhelm

- Simultaneous codes
- Critical case + emotional client + financial limits
- Very behind on records
- Short-staffed for weeks, no end in sight
- Already stressed, then an unexpected emergency

Stress vs. Overwhelm: What to Do

Stress: organize

- Prioritize, then take action
- Break work into steps
- Group like tasks
- Delegate to the team
- Use checklists to lighten the mental load

Overwhelm: shrink it

- First, get your body out of the stress cycle: step outside, breathe, reset
- Shrink the task: finish one record, make one call
- Focus on one simple next step

Stress means busy but thinking clearly. Overwhelm means your brain has hit pause.

Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Burnout

An occupational phenomenon from chronic workplace stress that hasn't been managed (WHO). Tied to organizational conditions, not a medical disease.

- Exhaustion: drained, depleted
- Cynicism: detachment, loss of motivation
- Reduced effectiveness: feeling less capable

"My work environment is unsustainable."

Compassion fatigue

Emotional and physical exhaustion from prolonged exposure to others' suffering. A form of secondary traumatic stress.

- Emotional depletion and reduced empathy
- Secondary trauma symptoms
- Can't separate work from others' pain

"The suffering I witness is overwhelming me."

Contributing Factors

Burnout

- Workload
- Meetings
- Bureaucracy
- Unclear priorities
- Frustrating processes
- Disengagement from work



Compassion fatigue

- Difficult cases
- Emotional toll
- Distressing stories
- Feeling helpless
- Sadness or moral distress

My Own Burnout: What Helped



- Defining and hiring the roles we actually needed
- Prioritizing goals for each day
- Exercise and real breaks
- Cutting distractions and time-wasters
- Building self-sufficiency in others




CVCA
CHESAPEAKE VETERINARY CARDIOLOGY ASSOCIATES
Dr. Neal Peckens



Solutions

Burnout

Largely owned by leaders and systems

- Manageable workloads
- Clear expectations and priorities
- Supportive leadership
- Autonomy and control
- Recognition and feedback
- Smart use of the team: delegate and assign

Compassion fatigue

Shared by individuals and teams

- Peer debriefing after hard cases
- Trauma-informed support
- Boundaries with clients
- Recovery time
- Reflective practices
- Time to process, emotional support

You Don’t Have to Carry It Alone

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988, any time (U.S. and Canada)

Not One More Vet (nomv.org)

Peer support for the whole team: DVMs, techs, support staff, and managers, including anonymous Lifeboat chat

Your EAP

Confidential counseling through your employer’s Employee Assistance Program. Ask HR

CLEAR Blueprint (NOMV)

For leaders: a workplace wellbeing framework built for veterinary employers

If you’re struggling, tell someone today.

Develop Strong Communication Skills

- Builds client trust and compliance
- Helps clients understand how to help their pets
- Navigates difficult conversations
- Reduces conflict and complaints
- Teams that communicate save lives
- Every role can speak up: tech to DVM, manager to owner

Communication and culture depend on each other.



Healthy and Effective Communication

Do

- Share information clearly, promptly, and honestly
- Ask questions when unsure
- Address concerns directly, through the right channels
- Listen actively
- Respect confidentiality while staying transparent

Don’t

- Withhold information that affects patient care or the team
- Gossip, side-talk, or communicate passive-aggressively
- Assume intent instead of seeking to understand
- Avoid difficult but necessary conversations
- Use a harsh tone

Know When and How to Evolve

First ask: is it boredom, burnout, or compassion fatigue? Then, what really needs to change?

Your environment

- Specialty, ER, GP, or shelter
- Academic, industry, or research
- High- or low-volume practice
- A healthier culture

Your role

- New skills: dentistry, anesthesia, ultrasound, rehab
- Credentials: VTS, CVPM, residency
- Training, mentoring, or leadership

Your schedule

- Fewer or shorter days
- Relief work
- A different shift pattern

Connect with Your Passion

Talent What am I good at?

Interest What am I excited about?

Values What speaks to my soul?



The Evolving Career

Veterinarians

- Medical director or leadership
- Telemedicine and consulting
- Palliative and end-of-life care
- Rehab and sports medicine
- Behavior, shelter, industry

Technicians

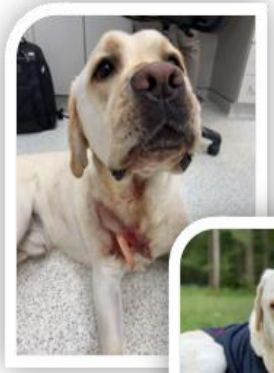
- VTS: anesthesia, ECC, dentistry, and more
- Rehab, behavior, or shelter medicine
- Training coordinator or educator
- Practice management
- Industry and technical support

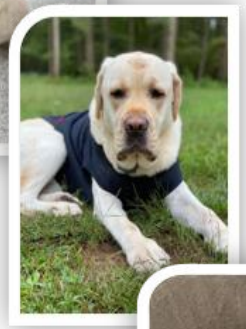
Practice leaders

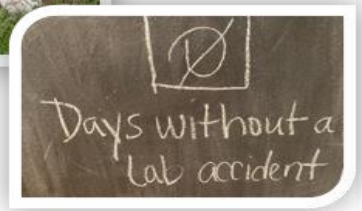
- CVPM
- Group or regional operations
- HR, recruiting, and training
- Consulting
- Ownership and entrepreneurship

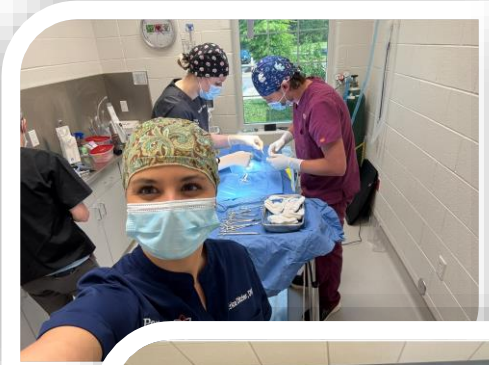
Veterinary medicine needs more leaders who know what it's like to work on the floor.

Focus on Impact and Purpose













Impact and Purpose in Practice

- Write your own mission statement
- Focus on your impact: restoring health, comfort, or a meaningful goodbye
- Save thank-you notes and read positive reviews
- Highlight “Against the Odds” cases
- Hear the story behind the patient
- Leaders: share wins with the whole team, front desk to kennel



Recap: Find a Way to Stay

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Thank you!