

Final Thoughts



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Julie has more than 20 years of experience within the veterinary field and with leading organizations. She has developed and executed training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for major companies in the animal health industry. She obtained her certification as a compassion fatigue specialist through the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology and has also completed training from The Figley Institute and Traumatology Institute. Julie's clients also gain from her experience as a certified health and wellness coach and corporate wellness specialist.

Technician, Heal Thyself

First and foremost, I don't think you are broken and in need of fixing. But I am concerned about something: you and your sustainability as a veterinary technician.

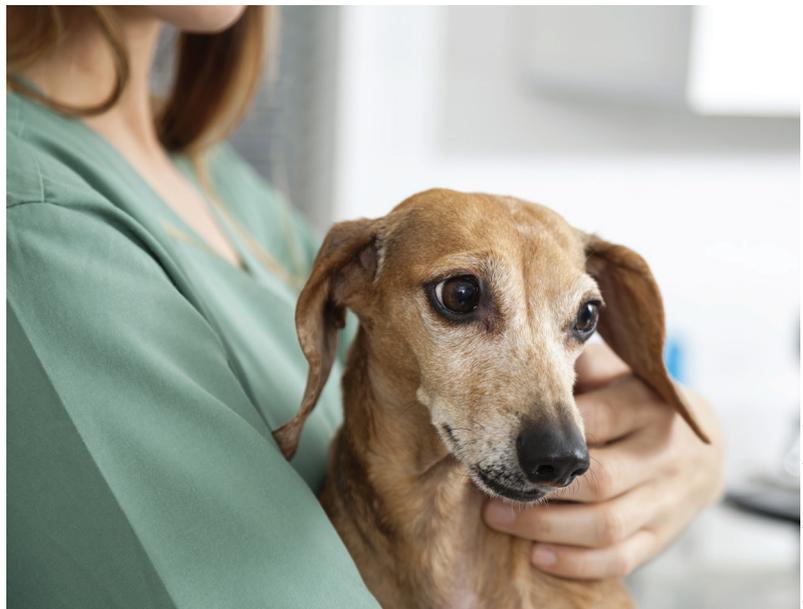
Over the past few weeks, I've been asking my compassion fatigue seminar and workshop participants the question, "How many of you consider yourself a healer?" Less than 10% of my audiences do, and I've noticed that most who do are veterinarians. This got me thinking...a lot.

Merriam-Webster defines *healer* as one who heals. So I dug a little deeper. What is the definition of *heal*? "To become healthy or well again; to make (someone or something) healthy or well again."

Stop me if I'm wrong, but is that not what veterinary medicine is all about? I wondered what I was missing and why veterinary professionals aren't identifying with their work in this way, especially veterinary technicians and nurses.

Healer or Not

This idea of healer goes back to the keynote speech given in August by Dr. Dan Siegel, neuropsychiatrist, at the American Veterinary Medical Association conference in San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Siegel spoke very candidly about the suicide rate plaguing veterinary medicine and said something I'm still thinking about. He said, "The problem is, we have a community of healers that haven't been taught to heal themselves."



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AS A VETERINARY TECHNICIAN, you've been given the rare gift of being able to aid in the healing of others, animals, and people. You've made a difference in more lives than you will ever know.

Is he on to something? I sure thought so. What I wasn't prepared for is that so many people in veterinary medicine don't consider themselves healers.

While it may not be necessary to claim "healer" status, what is necessary is to recognize that to provide care to another being in a sustainable way, we have to take care of ourselves first. This is not intuitive to anyone in a caregiving role.

When we put ourselves last on the list, why are we surprised when we feel stressed, anxious, depressed, depleted, or exhausted? It is our job to meet our needs, no one else's. We can't wait for others in our life to tell us to take a day for ourselves or go for a walk. That responsibility falls in our hands. We need to ask for what we need, unapologetically.

What You Need

Based on psychologist Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs," all human beings need the following:

- Sustenance/Health
- Safety/Security
- Rest
- Autonomy/Authenticity
- Creativity/Play
- Meaning/Contribution
- Love/Caring
- Empathy/Understanding
- Community/Belonging

Can you identify needs that are not being met in your life? Most of us can, and that is okay. The question is, what can you do to fulfill those needs?

We need to realize that the extent to which our work is traumatizing is the same extent to which we need to balance it with self-initiated action aimed at meeting our needs. This is not something we can ignore or hope will go away.

I recently met an LVT who has been a veterinary technician for 30 years. She told me that asking for what she needs from her family is much of what has sustained her in her career. She asks for "alone time" routinely and time to transition when she comes home from work. Her family knows that she needs 20 minutes or so to decompress after work. This is how she meets her need for rest.

If you live with others, what do you need to ask for to take care of yourself?

If you live alone, what is one thing you can start doing daily for yourself?

It doesn't have to be very time consuming. Finding 10 to 20 minutes a day to gift yourself is often enough.

What Gets in the Way

The most common reason I hear for not attending to ourselves

is that it is selfish. *Au contraire, mon frère*. Being selfish is when we care only for and about ourselves. That is not at all what I'm suggesting, and if you are reading this, I am absolutely certain that you are incapable of it. As a veterinary technician, you are called to serve others. It's part of who you are. That is beyond commendable, and I am grateful that you are in this world, serving animals in the way that you do.

But. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to think that we can serve others, give the best of ourselves and our hearts, and not have to do anything to maintain that beautiful well within. How long will your car run if you never refill the tank?

What are you telling yourself about why your needs don't matter? Remember, our thoughts determine our feelings.^a Our feelings dictate our actions, and our actions determine our results. Said another way, what you choose to think determines your outcome in life.

So if your thoughts are along the lines of, *I don't deserve to take time for myself*, why is that what you are choosing to think? Could you consider a thought like, *I'm good at what I do, I care deeply for my patients/animals, and I know I'm better when I take time for me*.

How You Start Your Day Matters

I study under many of the personal development thought leaders of our time, and I've found that they all follow their own very intentional morning routine to set their day up for success. I do too.

My routine involves excellent coffee, real food, meditation, and exercise. Sometimes my exercise becomes my meditation, but the routine is non-negotiable. I. Do. It. Every. Morning. Sustenance and health are enormous needs of mine that I honor every day.

Sometimes this means I have to get up earlier depending on my travel schedule or the day's activities. I do it anyway, because I know that following my routine will dramatically improve the quality of my mind, body, and soul for that day. I'll be better able to serve those I care for and feel better about myself.

When the start of your day is consistently filled with chaos, and then you go to work in the often unpredictable world of veterinary medicine, it is too easy to set yourself up for failure in your well-being and emotional state.

Be a Rebel

I'm asking you to break out of the traditional box of caregivers and practice giving to yourself. Be rebellious and stare down martyrdom. Don't be surprised when your mind chatters back, because it inevitably will. There will always be something else you should be doing other than gifting to yourself. Do it anyway.

A workshop participant recently told me that she had started honoring her need for creativity/play by taking a weekly painting class, something that she once really enjoyed and had decided to give to herself again. She told me how she fights with herself every week about it. Her mind will say things like, *You shouldn't go, you have so much laundry to do*. But instead of giving in to this subtle, "practical" sabotage, she pushes back and decides, *No, this is something I'm doing for myself. I really enjoy it, and it makes me feel good when I do it. The laundry isn't going anywhere*.

We all have this mind chatter. The best thing you can do with it is:

1. Anticipate it

Expect that your mind will try to derail you from your self-care efforts. Prepare for it. Think about what you will tell yourself when your mind tries to talk you out of going for that walk, doing yoga, enjoying a cup of tea outside, or reading a book for pleasure.

2. Acknowledge it

I literally say, *Oh I see you*, or *Oh you again*, to my mind chatter. I know I am not my mind,^a so when I recognize my mind trying to talk me out of what is in my best interest, I just smile and acknowledge it. I don't dwell on it or believe it, but I let it know I see it.

3. Answer it in a way that best serves you

This is where we can decide to think differently. Many people believe their mind chatter and never dream of answering it from their heart, *No. I need to and deserve to have some time to myself*. This will become much easier the more you do it, so don't give in to your old way of thinking.

As a veterinary technician, you've been given the rare gift of being able to aid in the healing of others—animals—and people. You've made a difference in more lives than you will ever know. If you also believe you have this gift, then please honor, cherish, nurture, and feed it.

The only thing holding you back from being the best version of yourself is your own thoughts. Thankfully, you can choose different thoughts any time you want. Why not start now? ■

^aFor more tips on how to learn to recognize and change negative thought patterns, read "The Golden Ticket to Feeling Better" on todayveterinarytechnician.com.