

Research finds veterinary medicine students experience higher depression levels than peers

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Veterinary medicine students are more likely to struggle with depression than human medicine students, undergraduate students and the general population, according to several recent collaborative studies from Kansas State University researchers.

Mac Hafen, therapist and [clinical instructor](#) in Kansas State University's College of [Veterinary Medicine](#), and researchers from Kansas State University, the University of Nebraska and East Carolina University decided to take a closer look at depression and anxiety among veterinary medicine students. Although the mental health of human medicine students has been extensively studied, the same extent of study has not been performed with veterinary medicine students. Additionally, most [veterinary research](#) related to depression involves pet owners, not veterinarians or students.

"We are hoping to predict what contributes to depression levels so that we can intervene and make things run a little bit more smoothly for students themselves," said Hafen, who has spent five years researching the well-being and mental health of veterinary students.

Once a semester, the researchers anonymously surveyed veterinary medicine students in various stages of academic study. The survey helped uncover a rate of depression occurrence and understand how it related to the amount of stress veterinary students experience during

their four years of study.

During the first year of veterinary school, 32 percent of the veterinary medicine students surveyed showed [symptoms of depression](#), compared to 23 percent of human medicine students who showed symptoms above the clinical cutoff, as evidenced by other studies.

The researchers also discovered that veterinary students experience higher depression rates as early as the first semester of their first year of study. Their depression rates appear to increase even more during the second and third year of school. During the fourth year, depression rates drop down to first-year levels.

Hafen said several factors might contribute to the higher rate of depression in veterinary medicine students. Veterinarians deal with stressors that human medicine doctors do not have to experience, such as frequently discussing euthanasia with clients. Although both programs of study are intense, veterinarians must understand a variety of animal species rather than focusing on the human body. Struggles with balancing work, school and life could also lead to higher depression rates.

Hafen said gender differences could also play a role, although such claims are inconclusive so far. Whereas medical schools are nearly split evenly between male and female students, about 75 percent of veterinary medicine students are female. National studies indicate that women are two to three times more likely than men to suffer from mood disorders.

The research team's studies found several other factors connected with higher depression occurrence, including: homesickness; uncertainty about academic expectations; a feeling of not belonging or not fitting in; and perceived physical health. The researchers had students rate their own physical health to indicate how they felt about their overall health.

Students who were happier with their physical health had lower depression rates.

But the studies contain more than just negative news; they offer interventions and ways that veterinary schools and their faculty and staff can help students struggling with depression and anxiety. Some of these ways include:

- Having clearer expectations of veterinary students, especially during the first year.
- Sponsoring events and organizations that help improve physical health.
- Empathizing with students and their concerns about their studies.

The researchers are optimistic that by helping veterinary medicine students care for their own mental health, these students become better prepared to help clients.

"The hope is that we can identify some ways to help alleviate some of the depression and the symptoms of [depression](#) and anxiety that might be occurring," Hafen said.

The researchers have already published two articles in the *Journal of Veterinary Medicine Education* about their work and are in the process of preparing another publication.

Hafen is also working on other research that looks at companion animal loss. He and researchers from the University of Nebraska have interviewed [pet owners](#) who have experienced companion animal loss to better understand the grieving process. They continue to gather empirical data for this study and are analyzing their findings.

"I have a sense for the grieving process from my own clinical work,"

Hafen said. "But we wanted to look at it from more of an empirical standpoint."

Provided by Kansas State University

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