

Social, cultural factors in veterinary field may hinder students, professionals from seeking mental health help

February 23 2022



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Previous research has shown veterinarians have higher rates of mental health concerns than most people in other professions, and even greater

compared to other health professionals, such as physicians or nurses.

Despite increased awareness of mental [health](#) resources and work to destigmatize mental health concerns, many veterinary professionals and those studying to be veterinarians do not seek help when they experience distress.

Now, a new study, led by Tamara Hancock, an assistant teaching professor at the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine, found that the high-achieving and perfectionist culture associated with veterinarians, along with the perceived stigma that comes with reaching out for help, may prevent [veterinary students](#) from taking advantage of mental health resources.

The findings may help institutions and mentors brainstorm practical solutions to provide veterinary students and professionals more flexibility to seek help when needed and be more well-rounded individuals. Hancock said although solutions could be easy to implement, educators and supervisors first must identify the barriers and then work to change the culture.

"A previous study had indicated two-thirds of licensed veterinarians are clinically depressed, yet nearly one-third do not seek help," Hancock said. "These are people that can really benefit from mental health services, so we wanted to better understand the barriers that might be keeping veterinary students in distress from taking advantage of the mental health resources available to them."

Hancock collaborated with Kerry Karaffa, a MU Counseling Center psychologist embedded specifically within the MU College of Veterinary Medicine, to distribute a survey to more than 500 veterinary students throughout North America. The survey screened the students for depression and anxiety symptoms and asked the students about their

experiences utilizing mental health resources, or their reasons for not doing so.

"We found many respondents say the high-achieving and perfectionist culture that often comes with the veterinary field can contribute to not only the stigma of others thinking you are a failure if you reach out for help, but also the internalization of that stigma, where they themselves start to feel ashamed for needing help," Hancock said. "Another respondent said, "I feel like most of us just accept vet school is going to be very hard and feeling miserable all the time is just how it goes." These perceived norms, whether true or not, quickly become reality because it is so embedded in the culture and identity of being a [vet student](#)."

Hancock also found that students with more severe depressive symptoms mentioned these barriers at a higher rate, and these perceptions were more likely to interfere with their daily functions, relationships and overall well-being.

"When discussing barriers to seeking help, we often talk about individual factors like time, financial constraints, lack of access or transportation," Hancock said. "These are definitely still at play as well, but our research shows there are also social and cultural factors involved. If we want to address mental health and promote mental well-being, we need to better understand the various barriers preventing people from taking advantage of available resources, and then we will be in a better position to discuss how we can promote positive change."

Hancock added some practical solutions institutions and mentors can consider based off the findings include incorporating more flexible classroom attendance policies or work-leave policies so students and employees can, for example, more easily attend a mid-day doctor's appointment or care for a loved one.

"Another suggestion for academic advisors or professional mentors is to ask students about their hobbies outside of veterinary medicine and to share your own hobbies, so they know it is okay to have interests and passions besides just being a vet," said Hancock, who also serves as the MU College of Veterinary Medicine's coordinator of curriculum and student outcomes. "I want the students to know we don't just want them to be good vets, we want them to be well-rounded individuals."

"'Obligated to keep things under control': Sociocultural barriers to seeking [mental health services](#) among veterinary medical students" was published in *Journal of Veterinary Medicine Education*. MU's Kerry Karaffa is a co-author on the study.

More information: Tamara S. Hancock et al, "Obligated to Keep Things Under Control": Sociocultural Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services Among Veterinary Medical Students, *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.3138/jvme-2021-0069](https://doi.org/10.3138/jvme-2021-0069)

Provided by University of Missouri

Citation: Social, cultural factors in veterinary field may hinder students, professionals from seeking mental health help (2022, February 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-social-cultural-factors-veterinary-field.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.