



Be in the now

There's plenty of anecdotal evidence that practising mindfulness can improve workplace culture and reduce stress. **Jacqui Gibson** reports on a Hawke's Bay veterinary practice that has successfully embraced mindfulness as a way of dealing with some of the challenges of the job.

FOR HASTINGS VETERINARIAN

Neil Stuttle, switching off after a long, stressful day at work is never easy. Sometimes it's the roster or an upset client that preoccupies him long after the kids have gone to bed. Other nights he'll spend hours chewing over a problem, such as how to solve professional burnout among the 40-odd people who make up his team.

"Switching off is definitely an issue for me. As a father of three young children, and a husband, I want to be more present for my family when I get home. The reality is that's much easier said than done," says Neil.

A companion animal veterinarian and Director at Vet Services Hawke's Bay, Neil is aware he's not grappling with this issue alone. "I know it's hard for most people in our profession. We're

getting busier and busier. Our clients have higher expectations. Most of us feel like we're under the pump. You read about the high rates of suicide, depression and anxiety among your peers in the veterinary industry. You experience some of these things yourself. You wonder, how do we make this line of work sustainable? How do we help the people around us have fulfilling careers? I think it's a problem that needs addressing."

And that's exactly what Neil was hoping to do when he enrolled his team in three one-hour sessions of mindfulness training in November last year. Over three weeks, they learned about mindfulness and practised its techniques, guided by mindfulness tutor and yoga instructor Kate McLeay.

MINDFULNESS – WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

- 1 Based on Buddhist thought and theory.
- 2 Popularised by University of Massachusetts professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, a cognitive scientist.
- 3 Explored by Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s when he set up the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine and developed mindfulness therapy for a variety of difficult-to-treat conditions.
- 4 Became popular in the early 2000s, with a range of approaches offered.
- 5 Although mindfulness has been around for thousands of years, scientific studies into the practice are still in their infancy.

Above left, Neil Stuttle veterinarian and director of the Vet Services Hawke's Bay, Hastings clinic.

Neil says the company put on a meal before each session and offered training free to anyone keen to give it a try. Almost half the staff (17 people) signed up, including veterinarians, reception staff and veterinary nurses.

Attendees learned about the theory of mindfulness, which is rooted in Buddhism. They practised focusing on the present, listening to one another and being more aware of their feelings and surroundings. How to breathe, take pauses and meditate were other skills taught.



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STRESSED? A FIVE-MINUTE MEDITATION MIGHT HELP

According to mindfulness theory, five-minute meditations can help you pay attention to the present moment by getting you to focus on breathing, emotions that surface and pass, and inner chatter. The idea is to view such moments in a non-judgemental way, with openness and acceptance.



Production animal veterinarian Greg Tattersfield says the training sessions involved lots of discussion and interaction. “You did need to share your thoughts with colleagues, which was a bit challenging. But we’re all human and no-one was judging – and the sharing really helped break the ice and remove any hierarchy that can exist at work,” says Greg.

“There really isn’t one way to do mindfulness,” says Kate, who is a former school principal and who uses a mixed method that draws on teaching models developed in the US and the UK. “But we do know from experience and some of the science coming through that it’s having a positive effect on stress. I definitely see a positive change in the people I work with, people in high-pressure industries like law, public health and competitive sports.

Essentially, you come away with the tools you need to reduce stress and reprogramme the subconscious mind.”

Neil says the clinic culture has improved since November’s training, and he’s thinking about running a follow-up course for those who missed out and anyone wanting a refresher. “There’s less stress overall. Coping has improved and we operate better as a team.”

The idea for mindfulness training came from the clinic’s head veterinary nurse, Nicola Sutherland, a friend and colleague who had trained with Kate in the past. Nicola found mindfulness helped her deal with emotional clients, staff conflict and the emotional impacts of nursing long-term patients who don’t survive.

Two of the new mindfulness techniques that production animal veterinarian Dave Warburton now uses

are self-awareness and being less critical of himself. “The techniques aren’t hard to learn, but they take practice. I use them when I have a lot on my plate at work or at home and I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed. That’s when I’ll go to the park, have lunch, practise mindfulness and go for a quick five-minute walk.”

Naomi Knight, receptionist at Vet Services Hawke’s Bay, says mindfulness training surprised her.

“It convinced me that it doesn’t matter how busy I am, I can always take a moment. In the past, I’d tried every fad from yoga to aqua aerobics to Zumba. But, over time, I found that at the end of a busy day exercise was the last thing I wanted to do. Instead, reaching for a glass of wine was more in line with how I was feeling. It was a wake-up call to learn from Kate that most of our day is spent in automatic pilot mode, with our minds

racing and focused on too many tasks.

“What else stood out for me? I learned it’s important to stop and bring oneself back to the present moment and experience exactly what’s happening at a given time. I learned to accept my feelings without judgement. We’re often our worst critics. I still struggle with some of the techniques like focusing my mind and allowing my thoughts to pass over me, but with practice I do feel more relaxed and ready for what’s coming next.”

According to the most recent Southern Cross Health Society and BusinessNZ survey report *Wellness in the Workplace 2017*, overall workplace stress and anxiety in New Zealand is on the rise. The report shows stress is up by 22.9% since 2014. It says that while there has been a strong focus on safety issues for employees due to

recent health and safety legislation, relatively less attention has been placed on health issues. It says stress contributes to employee absences, has negative impacts on company productivity and costs businesses in the long term. In summary, it recommends that businesses collect data on wellbeing and use the information to improve stress levels.

Looking back on the results of a recent staff review – carried out before mindfulness training – Neil says, “It wasn’t hard to tell we were struggling as a team. The signs were all there. The challenge with these things is finding tangible ways to improve.”

Kylie Wilson, a veterinary nurse, says giving staff strategies for dealing with stress is one good approach. “It’s been a good course for me. Veterinary clinics can be very stressful. If more

of us had coping strategies, the better our work environments and mental health would be.”

Meanwhile, Greg cautions against looking at mindfulness as an easy solution. “I think mindfulness is one way to help us be more resilient. I’d recommend it – although it’s not just a matter of doing a quick course, nailing a few questions and gathering a few CPD points. To me, mindfulness is a commitment to being a better version of you.” ^{VB}

Above left, receptionist Naomi Knight; above, mindfulness facilitator Kate McLeay who offers a variety of workplace courses. For more information see www.kate-mcleay.com.