

Creating Wellbeing and
Building Resilience in the
Veterinary Profession

A Call to Life



Sonja A. Olson



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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

Sonja Olson, an experienced emergency clinician, veterinary mentor, and health and well-being trainer of veterinary teams, shares her wisdom, her breadth of experience, and knowledge on the topics of well-being and resilience in this book. She also brings to life the voices of her colleagues across the globe. By doing so, she normalizes conversations around vulnerability and mental health. Sonja “talks the talk” and “walks the walk” without ego and will show how you, too, can have a long and fulfilling professional life as well as a personal life. This book brings to the reader both knowledge and experience that is useful to those studying and practicing in the veterinary profession. This will be a valuable addition to the libraries of veterinarians, veterinary technicians, nurses, and paraprofessionals.

Vanessa Rohlf, BA (Hons), MCouns&PsychTh, PhD,
Counselor, Psychotherapist, and Research Fellow

This is a great book for the vet community. It’s chock full of models, resources, questions, practices, and personal anecdotes from those on the front lines. We all want to feel seen and heard, that someone understands us, and Sonja does a great job with that, normalizing the experience of the reader. I especially appreciated the understanding and compassion for what clients are experiencing, which might also help for us to understand why they sometimes say and do the things they do. Part textbook, part self-help, this is the ideal book for any veterinary professional.

Julie Squires, *Certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist
and Certified Life Coach, Rekindle, LLC*

Dr. Sonja Olson’s passion is helping veterinarians thrive, and she is at the forefront of a grassroots movement to improve the well-being of both individual practitioners and the profession. *A Call to Life* takes a much-needed, comprehensive look at the unspoken codes and culture of veterinary education and practice. Using humor and compassion, Dr. Olson charts a path forward to new era of veterinary practice, one where veterinarians can flourish both at work and at home. This book is essential reading for every practitioner and student.

Karen R. Fine, DVM, *Author,
Narrative Medicine in Veterinary Practice, October 2021*

This book makes some big - and sometimes hard to hear - points without lecturing: instead, it feels like having a heartfelt, non-judgmental conversation. It recognizes that while a good deal of the onus is on us to change our perspective, there are outside forces beyond our control (forces identified and addressed with as much care

and importance). Reading this book is an emotional rollercoaster, but it ends on an optimistic and positive note without being stifling or overwhelming. *A Call to Life* is something we need early on in vet school: it would have changed my experience so much.

*Veterinary Surgeon and Veterinary Rehabilitation Practitioner,
BVM&S, MRCVS, Arizona, USA*

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*To my favorite human who happens to be my husband,
Matt, and to all of the animals that have been a part
of my life's journey. I am deeply grateful.*



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Foreword

When I was seven years old, we lived on a small hobby farm in a semi-rural area of Victoria, Australia. My parents had just purchased six Hereford calves that they planned to raise and then later sell at the stockyards.

I had purchased one, too, with my pocket money. Her name was Sarah.

As the cattle were settling into their new surroundings, I was eager to go and meet our new “pets”. Unfortunately, my eagerness was not shared by the small herd, and they moved away whenever I approached.

I did not, however, give up. I eventually discovered that if I lay still long enough on the ground, they would come to me.

I still remember the smell of the grass, the warmth of the summer breeze on my skin, the sound the cattle made as they came over to sniff me, this strange creature lying on their patch of grass. Having these kinds of connections with animals led to feelings of peace and happiness.

As you read this, you may think of your own early connections with animals, and by reflecting on this, you might see how your decision to move into the veterinary profession may have been shaped by these very experiences.

For many, being a veterinary professional is not just what we do. It is part of who we are.

When things go wrong, when we start to question our career—whether we have what it takes, whether we belong here—it affects us to the core of our identity, it can lead us to despair.

The flip side of this is that, when things go right, when we find our work meaningful, and when it leads to alleviating suffering and healing and saving lives—oh, the joy! Our purpose is fulfilled, and our hearts are full.

Such is the paradox of veterinary work. How do I know? I used to be a veterinary nurse. I have experienced, firsthand, the ups and downs of the profession.

Fast forward to today, I am now a registered (licensed) counselor and psychotherapist. I provide support through counseling, therapy, and education to veterinary professionals, and I hear stories just like this.

As I reflect on my work as a veterinary nurse which was over 20 years ago, the idea that veterinary work could impact on wellbeing was not really acknowledged or discussed. Perhaps I was naïve, but I certainly hadn't heard of the concepts of burn-out, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. The work did, however, at times affect me. It saddened me. It shocked me. It distressed me, and it also frightened me. I didn't talk about it. I thought it was just me.

Perhaps back then, in the medical profession, the idea that emotions impact working lives was seen as unprofessional and unscientific. Yet, it is the emotional connection we feel with animals which drew us into the profession in the first place. Further, what we also now know is that recognizing and managing emotions in clinical practice has real value. The skill enables veterinary professionals to provide

compassionate care to clients and patients, and it promotes professional longevity by fostering resilience.

This lack of acknowledgment of the emotional toll of veterinary work was widespread. We can even see it in the academic literature. Apart from a handful of studies addressing high rates of suicide in the veterinary profession (Blair & Hayes, 1982; Kinlen, 1983; Miller & Beaumont, 1995), it wasn't until the early 2000s that research efforts addressing the mental health issues faced by veterinary professionals significantly increased. More recently, there has been a shift toward investigating factors linked to job satisfaction, resilience, and wellbeing in the academic literature (Platt, Hawton, Simkin, & Mellanby, 2012). We now recognize how the work can be stressful as well as satisfying.

Still, I notice a chasm. It exists between what we know about mental health, wellbeing, and resilience in the academic literature and what those who work in the veterinary profession know, live, and breathe. And this is where Sonja Olson's book truly comes to life.

Sonja Olson, an experienced emergency clinician, veterinary mentor, and health and wellbeing trainer of veterinary teams, shares her wisdom and breadth of experience and knowledge on the topic of wellbeing and resilience in this book. She also brings to life the voices of her colleagues across the globe. By doing so, she normalizes conversations around vulnerability and mental health. Sonja "talks the talk" and "walks the walk" without ego and will show how you, too, can have a long and fulfilling professional life as well as a personal life.

This book brings to the reader knowledge and experience that is useful to those studying and practicing in the veterinary profession, making it a valuable addition to the libraries of veterinarians, veterinary technicians, nurses, and paraprofessionals. Its value lies in Olson's acknowledgment of the not uncommon imbalance in the journey of becoming a veterinary professional, with its emphasis on clinical skills, striving, precision, and doing in favor of self-care.

In the pursuit of this career, and even when we do attain it, we may focus on the next skill, hurry to the next client, or the next patient, not stopping to take a breath. We can very quickly lose sight of our seven-year-old self and forget why we are doing what we are doing in the first place, and we forget to be still— a sure recipe for burnout.

So, as you read this book, take it with an open and curious attitude, listen to the voices of those in your profession, do not give up, and know that you are not alone.

Dr Vanessa Rohlf, BA (Hons), MCouns & PsychTh, PhD
Counselor, Psychotherapist, and Research Fellow

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Author



Dr Sonja Olson grew up with her human and animal family members mostly in Maryland, but every summer included time with family in Wisconsin as well. She graduated from Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine with a focus on exotic animal medicine. Her professional path led to over 25 years of practicing clinical small animal and exotic emergency medicine in both private and corporate practice environments. The

myriad of opportunities to teach, mentor, and lead that arose during those years were deeply fulfilling, but she gradually recognized that there was a real lack of veterinary wellbeing awareness and skills. This combination fostered Sonja's passion to better understand, and then support, the holistic health of veterinary caregivers. She now focuses her energy on being a health and wellbeing trainer for veterinary associates through her current work role, podcasts, writing, and collaborative efforts with other like-minded souls. Creating awareness, heightening knowledge, and building compassionate communities will serve as the foundation for a thriving future veterinary profession. Reenergizing for her comes from enjoying playtime with her husband and furry kids, dark chocolate, yoga, running, and deepening her vipassana meditation practices.



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Illustrator

Dean Scott did four years of hard time at the University of California, Davis Veterinary Correctional Institute and was released on his own recognizance in 1993. Twenty-eight years of ongoing therapy later, he almost qualifies as a fully functional human being. His hours and days spent practicing veterinary medicine every week really interfere with his life. He is an author/illustrator, inflicting his humor on the unsuspecting populace with such high-brow fare as *The Veterinary School Survival Guides* (From the Back Row and Vet Med Spread), the dog breed parody book, *The Incomplete Dog Book: Nothing You Ever Wanted To Know About Dogs*, two volumes of cartoons titled *The Lighter Side of Veterinary Medicine*, two volumes of animal cartoons titled *Menagerie*, two children's books, *Cowabunga* and *Callie*, and a short story collection of fiction, *Something for Everyone*. His song parodies and veterinary skits can be found on YouTube under funnyvetdotcom.



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Introduction

In the veterinary caregiving profession, we have got some “issues” we need to discuss. We have a long-standing culture of perfectionism, of judging (ourselves and others), and, as a result, a whole lot of shame and unhealthy attitudes. This stigma that we “should” be smart enough, tough enough, selfless enough to be great veterinarians and technicians right out of the gate from our academic training is ubiquitous. We expect it of ourselves because it was indoctrinated before and during our clinical training. It is then reinforced in the clinical environments that we graduate into as we start to practice. This is the “novice” professional experience that is well-known and written about in the human caregiving literature. However, in veterinary medicine, we are just starting to acknowledge and apply the concepts from the human medical research and literature on the “occupational hazards” of being in a caregiving profession. Such terms as “compassion fatigue”, “vicarious trauma”, and “moral stressors” are a few examples that we are just in the last few years becoming familiar with and applying to what we have been feeling and experiencing in this profession for many decades.

In my 25 years as an emergency clinician, veterinary mentor, and supporter of our veterinary teams on wellbeing, I have experienced the many highs and lows that our profession delivers. The incredible feeling of helping a suffering animal recover and of working like a “well-oiled machine” with my ER team as we provided high-quality patient care are the highs. Teaching and being taught daily in clinical practice were deeply fulfilling. Yet, like many others, I suffered from the empathic distress, secondary trauma, and burnout that can come from being a deeply empathetic caregiver. I personally experienced the fear and feelings of entrapment and the identity crisis of not knowing what to do if I was not “Dr Olson, the emergency clinician” in a clinical environment. Through deep work in self-reflection, honesty, and clarifying my values and intentions, I have found my way to a healthier space where I am contributing to our veterinary profession and community in a way that I would not have imagined ten years ago. I am honored to now be in a novel role that provides wellbeing support to the amazing veterinary professionals who continue to selflessly give in the veterinary practice environment. Do I miss being on the clinical floor and working with veterinary patients and fellow veterinary colleagues? You bet. Do I feel like I am intellectually less engaged or excited about my professional development? Absolutely not! I have given myself permission to show up as my authentic self and to serve our profession in a way that contributes to my holistic wellbeing and to those that I support.

Throughout those many years, shifts, and roles, I am saddened by the amount of human suffering I have witnessed in the name of selfless caregiving. The unhealthy coping mechanisms that individuals develop, the sacrifice of time for self-care and for family, and the number of individuals who “burn out” and leave this profession honestly break my heart. How many might have stayed if given the opportunity to understand how they might have more skilfully navigated the hurdles and pain that led to the decision to leave or, God forbid, to harm themselves?

My goal with this book is not to provide a formulaic recipe of how to avoid or to “fix” these issues. Why not? The honest answer is that this is a far more complex and individualistic journey. Each one of us has to determine the “when”, the “what”, and the “how” to support ourselves as we proceed through our lives. What worked for me may or may not jibe with you and your concerns. To that end, it is paramount that we each cultivate a sense of self-awareness, of self-worth, and of self-compassion. We must own our “stuff”—the good and the rough. It is our responsibility to educate ourselves and become more aware of the occupational hazards related to caregiving. We then have to dedicate ourselves to creating a set of tools and solutions that not only support our improved wellbeing but also contribute to the shift in our veterinary culture toward one of honesty, vulnerability, and compassion—for ourselves and each other!

If you are seeking clarity and the opportunity to build a more “quake-proof” foundation to build your work–life integration upon, this is where we start. Have the courage to look inward and embrace your imperfect human self with candor and with kindness. We are then better able to allow ourselves to celebrate the amazing, inspirational work that we do to better the lives of animals in all the ways that we do as veterinary professionals every day.

This is not a book prescribing solutions or treatment to situations or conditions. Although you will find I reference white papers, books, and research, the primary focus of this book is to create a living narrative told by amazing veterinary professionals in different seats and in different countries.

Whether I reference them directly or not, the experiences and wisdom of these veterinary colleagues are embedded in my perspective and the words I chose here. As much as I had wanted this book to be out in the world last summer, I genuinely believe that it is better now as a result of the knowledge I have gained and the conversations I have had with colleagues over the course of the last year. The personal and professional challenges associated with this year of the Covid-19 pandemic and all of the other unprecedented socioeconomic and political challenges in our respective communities have exhausted us, motivated us, and taught us. We are more ready than ever to have the long-overdue difficult conversations that will address dysfunctions in so many parts of our lives.

Now, I invite you to this honest, open conversation. I believe we can, and deserve to, have a fulfilling veterinary career, *and* have a life that we love. We are a community that is dedicated to being humane to all beings and to supporting health and longevity. Let’s get started on fortifying ourselves and taking a stand for cultivating a professional culture of compassion and collaboration. We belong. We matter. We are more than capable. I believe in us.

This is the secret of accompaniment: I will hold a mirror to you and show you your value, bear witness to your suffering and to your light. And over time, you will do the same for me, for within the relationship lies the promise of our shared dignity and the mutual encouragement needed to do the hard things.

—**Jacqueline Novogratz**, *Manifesto for a Moral Revolution*