



Part 4 of our Wellness Revolution series

Be Strong & Courageous & Ask for Help

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Are you running on empty?

In the excellent parable *How Full is Your Bucket*,¹ the authors suggest everyone contains a metaphorical bucket that, when full of positive emotions, protects him or her against life's hassles and, when empty, makes him or her want to hide out from the world under the bed.

What keeps your bucket full? Healthy relationships, meaningful work, rewarding activities, praise and recognition, and daily doses of fun. What drains it? All the challenges and upsets you face daily.

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles at brief.vet/veterinary-wellness



The American Counseling Association defines counseling as a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.

Signs of Empty Bucket Syndrome²

- Feeling overwhelmed or not yourself
- Using alcohol, drugs, food, or sex as a coping mechanism
- Losing someone or something important
- Experiencing a traumatic event
- Feeling that nothing is fun or pleasurable

Today's world is complicated. In the midst of significant life trials, minor events (eg, a spat with a friend, a fender-bender, a negative work episode) can throw even the most resilient over the edge. The time comes when everyone finds his or her bucket empty.

When to Reach Out

What do you do when you find your emotional bucket is empty? Most people struggle silently, ignore the pain, berate their weakness, or mask negative feelings with destructive behaviors (eg, spending too much money, exploding at loved ones, shutting down emotionally), all of which keep buckets chronically empty and make people susceptible to burnout, compassion fatigue, or other emotional and physical maladies.

If this sounds familiar, it may be time for you to reach out. You do not have to have a diagnosable mental illness, be debilitated with depression or anxiety, or experience life-threatening thoughts to seek help. In my 35 years of experience, I have advised numerous clients that it takes strength and courage to reach out for help when you need it. The earlier you reach out and learn new ways of coping with life stresses, the harder you will be.

Helpers Seldom Ask for Help

Research indicates that those in the medical professions are notoriously poor at seeking help themselves.³ This seems peculiar because veterinary teams tell clients they much prefer to see a pet early, before an illness becomes serious or chronic, yet they ignore, avoid, or deny problems when it comes to caring for themselves. Rather, they choose to suffer in silence and hope whatever plagues them goes away.

Reaching out for help seems to carry a perverse stigma. Perhaps people are afraid of seeming weak or helpless and believe scary emotions are better buried or asking for help is shameful. None of these statements are true. Reaching out is always a wise action to take.

Making Sense of Mental Healthcare

The American Counseling Associa-



tion defines counseling as a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals, but the confusion about finding an appropriate counselor or therapist can be a stumbling block.

The mental health field has a bewildering number of specialties and titles that can make searching for a suitable therapist a daunting task, especially when you are running on empty. (See **Types of Mental Health Practitioners.**)

Although each mental health specialty has slightly different training or licensure requirements, all are trained to guide those in need toward better health and wellbeing. It is important to know that only primary-care physicians, psychiatrists, and nurse practitioners with a mental health specialty can prescribe psychotropic medication, whereas other qualified mental healthcare providers can refer for or help manage medication. Licensed practitioners have had years of supervised training in counseling and providing therapy. Mental health specialists can help you decide the mode of counseling that will best help you recover and thrive.

Finding Assistance

Reaching out to those you trust, starting with your family physician, is the best way to find a counselor. Most primary-care physicians are familiar with the mental health practitioners in their communities and can help you figure out a potential best fit. Other good sources are community mental health clinics,

women's centers, and university counseling centers. Friends and family members can also be good sources for finding practitioners who counseled them successfully.

Although finding a licensed, well-trained, and respected professional is imperative, recognize that your comfort level with the practitioner is

Types of Mental Health Practitioners

Mental health practitioners (MHPs) have numerous titles and training paths,⁵ and most can provide counseling, education, and guidance regardless of their title, but that should be clarified before a visit. The largest differences are their focus, specialty, and educational background. A counselor's most important quality is his or her ability to form an empathic therapeutic alliance.

- **PSYCHIATRISTS** are medical doctors who specialize in mental healthcare and can prescribe medications. Most rely on other MHPs to provide therapy or counseling to their clients.
- **PSYCHIATRIC NURSES** are specialists who first train as registered nurses but have additional training in psychiatry and psychotherapy. Most states allow them prescription privileges.
- **PSYCHOLOGISTS** receive special training in making diagnoses and psychological assessments, as well as a wide variety of psychotherapies and research studies.
- **SOCIAL WORKERS** receive in-depth training in counseling and learning to work with people within the context of their environment.
- **LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS** have at least a master's degree and are required to have more than 2000 to 3000 hours of direct counseling experience to become licensed.

It takes strength and courage to reach out for help when you need it.

most important. A productive working relationship is the best predictor of a good therapeutic outcome.⁴ Counseling may not always be easy, but you deserve to feel supported, understood, and respected, and these elements should permeate your counseling experience.

Strength Through Help

Life is not always easy, and no one is immune to stress or overload. However, the decision to suffer alone or in silence is never wise. Just as veterinary professionals prefer seeing pets at the early stage of an illness, mental health practitioners suggest you seek help early in your struggles, so they have the best chance of success in helping you manage life's problems and challenges productively. Counseling cannot make problems disappear, but it can teach you new coping strategies.

Conclusion

As jazz singer Lena Horne wisely shared, "It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it." Learning productive ways to weather challenges—or fill your bucket—can make all the difference. ■■■

References

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for the past 18 years. She was a cofounder of the Veterinary Leadership Experience, an experiential retreat geared toward building personal leadership skills and a wellness mindset for veterinary students and practitioners. Additionally, she was the founding editor in chief of *Exceptional Veterinary Team* and *Veterinary Team Brief*. Kathy is a member of the AVMA Wellness Task Force and has helped launch a professional group for veterinary mental health practitioners. She speaks and writes about wellness and wellbeing issues throughout the profession.

FUN FACT: Kathy has 2 grandchildren under age 3 and 2 more on the way. She has found that being a nana is one of the best bucket-filling endeavors ever!

TAKE ACTION

If you have been contemplating getting help, do it!

- 1 Give yourself permission to ask for help if you are struggling.
- 2 Check with your physician or trusted friends for a referral to a reliable licensed counselor or therapist.
- 3 Screen counselors over the phone to find your best personal fit.
- 4 After the first visit, ask yourself if you felt supported, understood, and hopeful. If not, try another counselor!
- 5 Collaborate with your counselor to create a working plan to ensure your increasing wellbeing.
- 6 Do not hesitate to set up periodic checkups once counseling is complete to ensure you keep your bucket full.