



**Part 3 of our Wellness Revolution series**

# Quieting Your Brain: Handling Stress with Ease

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Successful veterinarians balance a healthy sense of *striving* for success with *emotional awareness* guided by *flexibility*. Each skill involves carefully managing a well-trodden path between extremes (ie, to develop the moderate middle by approaching relationships not with overt aggression or passivity, but with assertiveness). When flexible individuals encounter failure, they maintain an attitude of willingness to try new strategies rather than willfully clinging to the fixed and unsuccessful habits that failed in the first place.

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles, published in the January-February and March issues, at [brief.vet/veterinary-wellness](http://brief.vet/veterinary-wellness)



Veterinary well-being arises from a sense of engagement with complex challenges, accomplishment, personal growth, meaning, and social connectedness.<sup>1</sup>

By purposely pursuing your values, you will move in a direction congruent with your life goals. For example, when making decisions, use your primary values as guides. What is most important to you? Fairness, compassion, kindness, family? When you integrate what means the most into your decision, you will feel more confident about approaching challenges or difficult conversations despite everyday concerns.

Worry and anxiety about such decisions or situations are normal, so do not let them get in the way as you move forward. Quiet your brain by reminding yourself that in the midst of numerous possible paths, you are taking the one most in sync with your essential values.

## By purposely pursuing your values, you will move in a direction congruent with your life goals.

### **Adapting to Discomforting Thoughts**

For example, most veterinarians will inevitably confront a medical error that costs a patient's life, an emotional outburst that shakes a veterinary nurse's self-confidence, or the hopelessness of not knowing the answer in a troubling ethical situation. Avoiding the consequences because you are paralyzed by the need to find a perfect solution only worsens the outcomes.<sup>2</sup> It is imperative to accept that no one is, can be, or will be perfect. Giving yourself permission to let go of the need for perfection is the healthy and compassionate response the situation demands. Learning to live with the knowledge you are a human who

makes mistakes is adaptive and beneficial. What a relief it would be if we all recognized that a thought is just a thought and a feeling is just a feeling, and how a person invests in those thoughts or feelings is their only power. Quieting our brain comes with recognizing that our thoughts, feelings, and worries exist, but we do not have to lend them power by attending to them or arguing with them. Just notice them and make your value-based decision or action in spite of their presence.

### **Driving Your Bus**

Imagine this. You are driving your bus toward your most meaningful values (eg, being a caring parent and partner, acting as a resource for



colleagues at work, reaching out to provide support to friends in distress). You pick up some unruly passengers (eg, those who are self-critical, emotionally over-active, physically uncomfortable) who threaten you with obscenities about your lack of qualifications or poor driving skills. This scenario plays out in almost everyone's head as we attempt to strive for value-based decisions or actions.

Knowing your own "unruly passengers" will limit their ability to disrupt your progress. Who are your most frustrating passengers? Which ones distract you from pursuing the goals or outcomes you want most? When are you most likely to give into their jeers and let them hijack your bus?

What if you choose to continue to drive toward your values, despite their heckling? Pressing forward, regardless, allows you to choose your values over your fears (ie, the unruly crowd). You can wait for the right moment or until you feel motivated to make changes in your life—or you can acknowledge that successfully navigating a tough situation will make you feel more powerful and able to make useful decisions.

## Using a Flexible Approach

Recognizing the emotions that trip you up and being flexible can effectively overcome the urge to avoid and exacerbate problems.<sup>3</sup> Everyone likely can think of times when they ignored a problem or procrastinated and did not complete an important task because of self-doubt about succeeding or ensuring the project was completed precisely right.<sup>4</sup> Rather than pushing away the discomfoting emotion, which could prevent motivation for and engagement in the task, accept that discomfort is a natural part of taking on a demanding challenge. The goal is to live with and move through that discomfort.

## Conclusion

You can accept driving your bus in the direction of your values even while reflecting on worries or negative thoughts about a difficult client, a significant practice business decision, or a problematic colleague. Negative and self-critical thoughts plague most people, but they do not have to cause mental paralysis. By learning to live with and accept such thoughts as normal, you can handle stress with ease. ■

## References


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## TAKE ACTION ✓

Use these 7 practical methods to defeat negative self-talk (or control those unruly passengers on your bus).<sup>4</sup>

### 1 Emotion Regulation

- Manage your internal dialogue so you stay effective under pressure.
- Challenge the *negative feelings are bad* myth by writing down examples of an emotion's function to explain your response (eg, feeling disappointed is not bad—it says something I invested time and energy into did not produce the results I anticipated).
  - Think of an emotional experience as a wave that comes and goes, and accept emotion with curiosity rather than judgment.

### 2 Impulse Control

- Delay gratification and manage behavior impulses.
- Choose areas where you can make headway first, before taking on more challenging hurdles.
  - Regularly look at tangible reminders of your values (eg, pictures of your family, quotes that represent the type of friend you want to be) and how you have met goals along the way.

### 3 Causal Analysis

- Accurately identify sources of adversity.
- Write down ruminative concerns to see the links in your chain of thinking that cause you to exaggerate self-critical judgments.
  - Ask what you would tell a loved one who is experiencing your same troubling thoughts or feelings and give yourself that same compassionate response.

### 4 Self-Efficacy

- Believe you can solve problems successfully.
- Be grateful about obstacles you have overcome.
  - Break down a large, difficult task into conquerable steps.

### 5 Realistic Optimism

- Stay positive and realistic when planning for the future.
- Identify pleasant events that will help motivate you to continue along a difficult path.
  - Set aside time to write down events you have mastered so you can refer to the list when experiencing self-doubt.

### 6 Empathy

- Read other's behavior cues to deepen relationships.
- Do not let important relationships fade.
  - Ask about a colleague's free time with follow-up questions beyond *How are you?* (eg, *I remember you said you were going on a trip this past weekend. Tell me more about it.*)

### 7 Reach Out

- Approach challenges without shame.
- Risk being uncomfortable by trying an activity you have previously sidestepped.
  - Recognize how anxiety may prevent you from doing the things you value most, and approach challenges you want to avoid.