Balancing Accountability and Empathy: Supporting Mental Health in Veterinary Regulation

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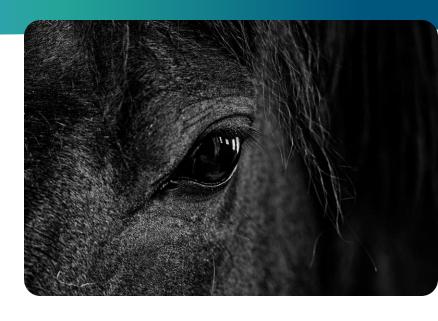




Session Overview

Today we'll explore:

- The emotional burden of regulatory work
- Compassionate communication with licensees
- Caring for the regulators themselves
- Tools for resilience and wellbeing





Why This Topic Matters

Regulatory decisions are:

- High-stakes & life-changing
- Emotionally draining for both sides
- Often unsupported in terms of wellbeing







Moral Stress in Regulation

Tension between:

- Accountability → Protecting public trust
- Empathy → Supporting struggling licensees

Leads to:

- Moral distress
- Compassion fatigue
- Burnout







Audience Poll

Who here has ever felt overwhelmed, stressed, or emotionally impacted by a regulatory decision?



In Your Words

"I lose sleep after revoking a license."

"I carry the weight of others' struggles."

"We support the profession, but who supports us?"





Session Objectives

By the end of this session, you will:

- Recognize the impact of regulation on both licensees and regulators
- Learn compassionate communication strategies
- Explore tools to prevent burnout and moral distress
- Identify resources for personal and collective wellbeing





Setting the Stage: The Regulatory Context



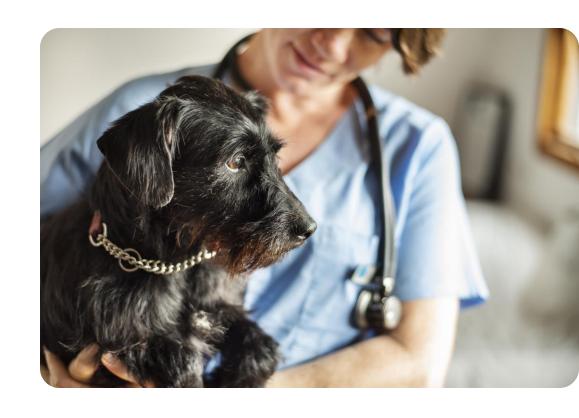




High Stakes Decisions

Regulatory actions can mean:

- License suspension or revocation
- Public scrutiny and stigma
- Career and livelihood changes







Ellsworth veterinarian disciplined for 5th time in 18 years

Cole County case alleges the Missouri Veterinary Medical Board neglects investigative duties



by Bill Trotter January 6, 2025 After her horse was left with a debilitating condition, Kerri VanMeveren was not happy with how the board handled her complaint

BY: ANNELISE HANSHAW - JULY 18, 2025 5:55 AM





















Critics say the board regulating veterinarians in AZ routinely dismisses serious complaints, showing urgent need for reform

BY: JEROD MACDONALD-EVOY - JANUARY 6, 2025 1:51 PM















- 18. Dr. Ewing then admitted to the Committee that she had not told the truth about the circumstances of Barney's death either to Ms. Thompson or to the ECVETS owner and management team, or to the Board and Committee No. 7.
- 19. Dr. Ewing stated to the Committee that Barney's condition had declined during the early morning hours of 1/31/18, and shortly after 6:30 a.m., while she was alone with him, he collapsed and was gasping. She said she made the decision to cuthanize him because he was dying. She administered by injection several mls of Euthasol to euthanize Barney. She told the Committee she thought that what she was doing was an act of compassion; she indicated she did not want to see another animal suffer and die. Later during discussions with the Committee,

Dr. Ewing said she believed she had been suffering from "burnout."





The Impact on Licensees

Common experiences:

- Shame, fear, stigma
- Financial / career disruption
- Mental health struggles (anxiety, depression, suicidality)





The Impact on Regulators

Common experiences:

- Emotional burden of complaint decisions
- Pressure to uphold public trust
- "Carrying the weight" of others' suffering







Empathy Fatigue

- Feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted and have difficulty demonstrating empathy
- Usually due to repeated experiences of emotional empathy





Forms of Empathy

- Cognitive empathy: ability to identify or have an awareness of another person's feelings or emotions
- Emotional empathy: ability to share or experience feelings of empathy
- **Empathic concern**: desire to improve another person's suffering or circumstance
 - Consider what can be done in this situation to alleviate this person's or pet's suffering







Moral Stress

- Definition: The emotional strain experienced when individuals are confronted with situations that challenge their moral beliefs or values.
- Conflict between what you want to do and what you must do.
- Example: Wanting to support a struggling licensee **AND** needing to protect the public.





Moral Distress and Moral Injury

• Moral distress: The feeling of frustration, helplessness, or guilt that occurs when an individual knows the right ethical action to take but is unable to carry it out due to external barriers.

• **Moral injury:** The emotional, psychological, and spiritual harm that results from events where individuals feel they have violated their core moral beliefs.





Moral Distress Builds Up Over Time

Moral Moral Moral residue distress distress crescendo Moral residue crescendo Time





Compassion Fatigue

Emotional, social, and spiritual exhaustion that decreases the desire, ability, and energy to feel and care for others.

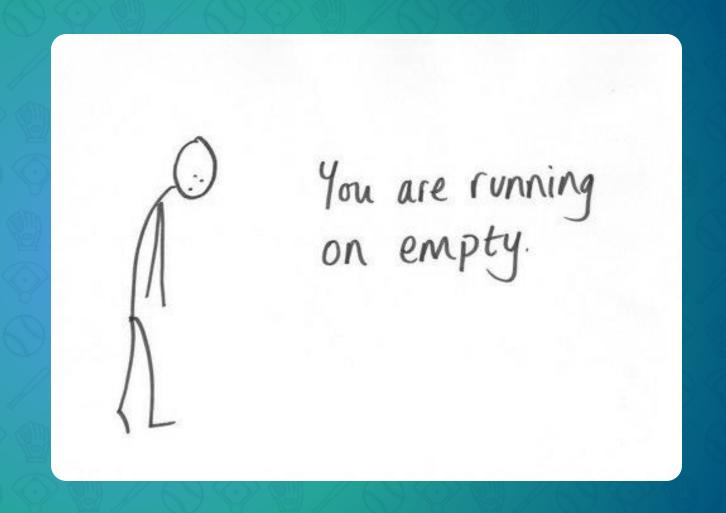






Compassion Fatigue

- The cost of caring
- Caring very much and working very hard, without recognizing and caring for your own needs







Compassion Fatigue – Phases

- 1) Zealot phase: ready and willing
 - Able to solve problems / make a difference
- 2) Irritability phase: reduced enthusiasm
 - Tired / unwillingness to discuss work
 - Thicker emotional shield
 - Neglect for self and others

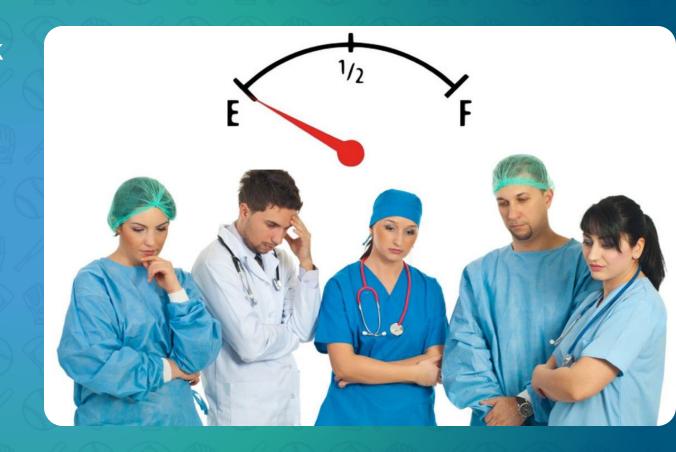






Compassion Fatigue – Phases

- 3) Withdrawal phase: avoidance of work
 - Mock clients / colleagues
 - Avoid difficult cases / patients
 - Numbness / medical mistakes
- 4) Zombie phase: helplessness / rage
 - Hate people / co-workers
 - Everyone is "ignorant" or "incompetent"
 - Disdain for clients / patients
 - No patience







MEMBERSHIP

HOME ▶ WELLBEING ▶ ASSESS YOUR WELLBEING

ADVOCACY

https://www.avma.org/resourcestools/wellbeing/assess-your-wellbeing

Assess your wellbeing

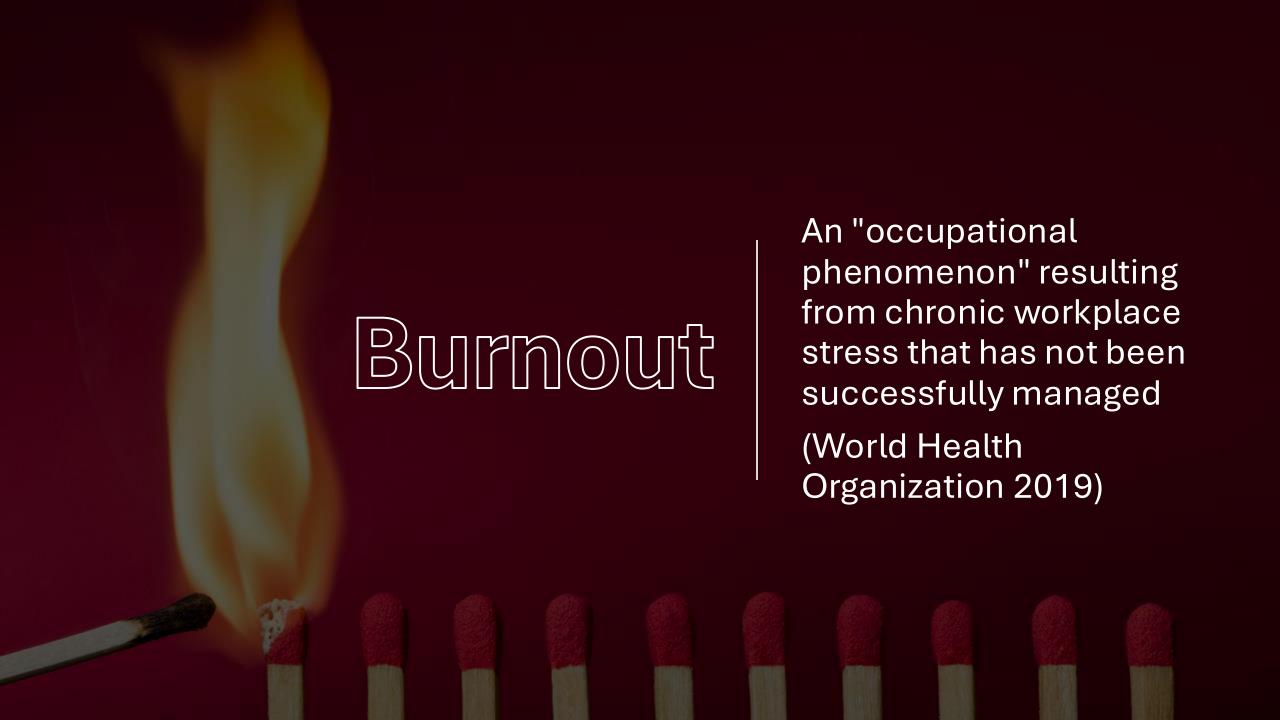
The **Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) assessment** is a widely validated, self-administered assessment tool that measures the negative and positive effects of helping others who are experiencing suffering and trauma. It can be used as a guide to assess your balance of positive and negative personal and work-related experiences. The tool is designed to provide introspection about oneself and one's environment, and can become a starting point for change. Please note that the assessment is not a diagnostic test, and therefore no official diagnosis can be determined based on the results.

The tool can help you measure how you are being affected in three areas that are critical to mental wellbeing – compassion satisfaction, compassion stress, and compassion fatigue – and may help you identify areas where you want to focus your self-care. This audio introduction to the tool gives a good overview to help get you started. Once you have completed your assessment,









Burnout Symptoms

Emotional exhaustion

- Feeling drained and depleted
- Dreading work

Depersonalization / Cynicism

- Detachment from patients, clients, or team
- Irritability and sarcasm

Reduced personal accomplishment

- Feeling ineffective or stuck
- Loss of pride or meaning





Maslach Burnout Inventory



Emotional Exhaustion: "I feel emotionally drained from my work"



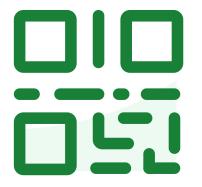
Cynicism: "I don't really care what happens to some animals"



Reduced Personal Accomplishment: "I have not accomplished many worthwhile things on the job"







Join at slido.com #3666945







"Which of these have you experienced in your role as a regulator or board member?"



Communicating with Compassion







Why Compassion Matters

- Builds trust and reduces defensiveness
- Helps licensees feel heard and supported
- Mitigates moral stress for regulators





When have you felt challenged as a regulator during a conversation with a licensee?







The Disconnect in Hearings

- Board perspective: "We want to help, ensure safety, uphold trust."
- Licensee perspective: "I'm being judged, blamed, or punished."





Compassionate Communication Principles

- Active listening → Hear the whole story
- **Empathy** → Acknowledge feelings without judgment
- Boundaries → Clarity in expectations and decisions





Key Phrases to Shift Dynamics

Instead of: "We hear you, **but** we must protect the public."

Try: "We hear you, and we must protect the public."

- Add validating language:
 - "I can see this process is overwhelming."
 - "Your wellbeing matters as we move through this."







Helping licensees to feel seen, heard, and understood.

LAURA Acronym

- Listen to what the person is saying
- Ask questions to clarify what was said
- Understand what was said
- Respond appropriately
- Ask more questions to determine what else is needed





Listen

- Try not to think about what you'll say in response
- Focus on hearing their frustrations or concerns
- Use complimentary non-verbal communication







Maintain Open Body Language

- Nodding head
- Interested facial expression
- Uncrossed arms
- Leaning forward





Ask

- Use open-ended questions that do not begin with *why*
- Be genuinely curious about their experience, opinions, and feelings







Ask Open-Ended Questions

- "What do you feel is the best next step?"
- "We'd like to hear your thoughts."
- "What is your perspective on what happened?"
- "How do you feel about what we've shared?"
- "Tell us more about that..."







Understand

- Take a few minutes to absorb and reflect if needed
- Use reflective listening to clarify what you heard







Practice Reflective Listening

- Offer a summary or thought back to the person to confirm whether you understand them correctly
- "So, what you're saying is..."
- "It sounds like..."







Respond

- **Empathy** for the other person's situation and experience
- Clarifying what remains to be understood
- **Explaining** your thoughts and point of view







Empathy Statements

- "It sounds like you're feeling really overwhelmed right now."
- "I can hear how frustrating this situation is for you."
- "It seems like you're feeling discouraged by our decision."
- "I sense how worried you are about the outcome."
- "It sounds like you're feeling hurt by this process."







Aim for sharing thoughts that are...

- Precise and based on facts
- Not based on emotion
- Not defensive
- Use "I" or "we" statements rather than "you" statements whenever possible





Ask

- "I'm curious about..."
- "I'm wondering..."
- "Help us understand..."
- "Walk us through..."









Which of these situations do you feel most challenged with during regulatory conversations?





Paired Practice Exercise (5 min)

Pair up

- One person = regulator, other person = licensee
- Licensee makes a challenging statement: "You don't care about me!"

How do you respond using the LAURA script?





Tips for Supporting Licensees with Mental Health or Substance Use Problems

- Do: use validating, supportive language
- **Don't:** minimize, blame, or stigmatize
- Examples:
 - "It sounds like you've been under a lot of stress."
 - "What support do you have in place right now?"





Boundaries Still Matter

- Compassion ≠ excusing unsafe practice
- Compassion = balancing accountability with empathy





Key Takeaways for Communicating with Compassion

- Connection first, decisions second
- Compassion reduces defensiveness





What would you do differently if you could go back to the challenging situation you had?







Caring for the Regulators







The Emotional Toll

- Stress → Sleep disruption, rumination, guilt
- Chronic exposure → Burnout, compassion fatigue
- Silence & stigma → Isolation





Protect Yourself While Protecting the Public

- Emotional impact is inevitable
- How you process it → determines sustainability







What strategies do you currently use to manage stress in your work?





Negative Coping Strategies

- Disciplinary hearings
- Member or public feedback

Stressor

Strategy

- Substance use
- Social media
- Overworking

- Emotional exhaustion
- Cynicism

Burnout





Positive Coping Strategies

- Disciplinary hearings
- Member or public feedback

Stressor

Strategy

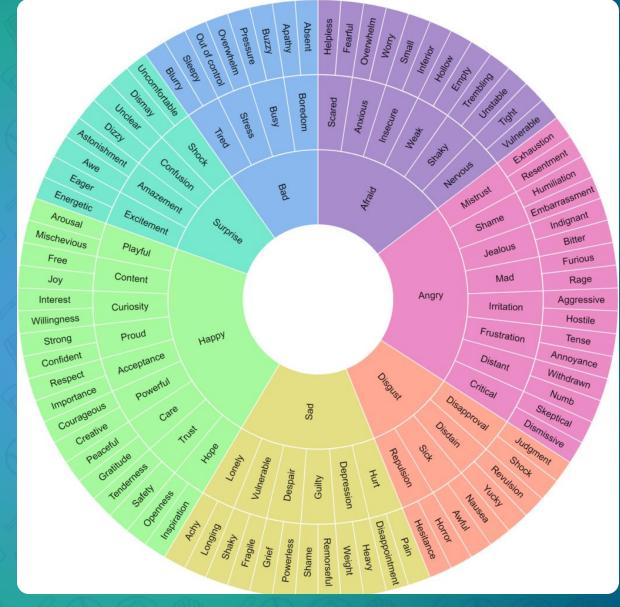
- Debriefing
- Peer support
- Mindfulness
- Self-compassion

- Ability to bounce back
- Sustain role long-term

Resilience



Emotion Labeling







Mindful Reset



5 things you can see



4 things you can hear



3 things you can touch



2 things you can smell



1 thing you can taste





Structured Group Debriefing

- A meeting held to review an event
- In healthcare settings, used for evaluating medical or emotional experiences
- Benefits include:
 - Processing difficult or distressing situations
 - Increasing social support
 - Reducing isolation and PTSD
 - Normalizing emotional reactions
 - Learning coping strategies from colleagues
- Best held within 24-72 hours of the event
- All impacted members of the board invited







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Critical Incident Group Debriefing (CIGD) for Veterinary Teams

At Reviving Veterinary Medicine (RVM), Critical Incident Group Debriefing (CIGD) is more than an informal check-in – it's a structured, supportive process that helps veterinary teams recover and grow after emotionally intense events. Whether it's a traumatic patient outcome, client conflict, or an unexpected workplace crisis, CIGD empowers teams to process these experiences in a healthy, productive way.

Book a session

Learn more

What is Critical Incident Group Debriefing?

Critical incidents are situations that occur outside of our normal frame of reference and challenge us to understand and cope with what has happened. CIGD is a short-term, evidence-based group intervention designed to help teams navigate the immediate aftermath of these critical incidents. It provides a safe space for veterinary professionals to share their experiences, process emotions, and gain a deeper



PDF Handout: <u>revivingvetmed.com/critical-incident-debriefing</u>



Critical Incident Debriefing: What You Need to Know



A Handout for Veterinary Professionals

Common Responses After a Critical Incident

Working in veterinary medicine means facing emotionally and physically intense situations. After a critical incident, it's normal to experience a variety of stress responses. These reactions can appear immediately or may take days, weeks, or even months to surface.

Physical Responses

- Feeling on edge or restless
- · Fatigue or lack of energy
- · Nausea or upset stomach
- · Sweating, headaches, or body aches
- Dizziness
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- · Muscle twitches
- · Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Difficulty relaxing or resting

Thinking Responses

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Memory problems
- Replaying the incident repeatedly in your mind
- · Flashbacks or intrusive thoughts
- · Distorted sense of time
- Blaming yourself or others







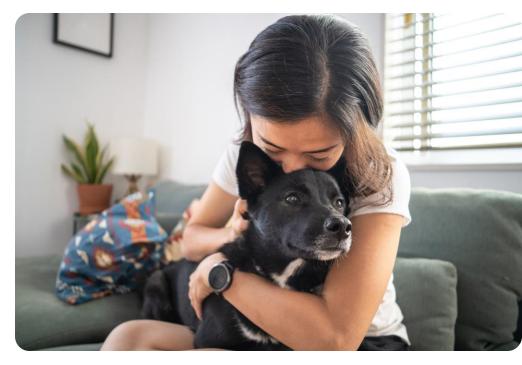
Nurture Social Connections

• Knowing that there are friends or colleagues to call during difficult times helps to

alleviate distress

Stay connected with friends and colleagues

- Text message
- Group chats
- Email updates
- Zoom calls
- Regular meet-ups
- Find safe and supportive spaces online





Discerning the effect of the relationship between disclosure and responsiveness on depression, anxiety, and compassion fatigue among veterinarians (*J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2023)



- Surveys scoring 230 veterinarians in a private Facebook online group
- The more veterinarians perceived that responses to their disclosures about work-related stress were validating, understanding, and caring, the lower levels of compassion fatigue, anxiety, and depression symptoms they reported





Disengage From Emotional Empathy



Emotional empathy = taking on others' feelings → draining

Empathic concern = recognizing suffering, wishing well → without absorbing

Repeat the phrase:

This is not my distress
This is not my pain





Self-Compassion



- Compassion directed inward
- Relates to how individuals perceive themselves during times of stress and suffering
- Weakens the relationship between perfectionism and depression / anxiety
- Is associated with reduced self-criticism and rumination and increased resilience among veterinarians





Three Components of Self-Compassion (self-compassion.org)



Self-kindness: treating ourselves as we would a close friend who was going through a difficult time



Mindfulness: being open to and aware of our suffering without getting caught up in it or swept away by negative reactions



Recognition of common humanity: accepting that we are all flawed and imperfect and will make mistakes or experience misfortune





Take a Self-Compassion Break

- Think of a situation that is causing you stress. See if you can feel it in your body.
- Then say to yourself:
 - This hurts / ouch / this sucks.
 - Other people feel this way / I am not alone / we all struggle.
- Then put your hands on your heart and say:
 - May I be strong / may I be patient / may I accept myself





Self-Compassion Journaling

- Think about the situation and write down everything you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain
- Mindfulness: bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose and write them down
- **Common humanity**: write down how the experience is connected to the larger human experience
- **Self-kindness**: write some kind, understanding words of comfort





Self-Compassion Journaling Example

Case Scenario: A regulatory board decides to suspend a license due to repeated complaints from clients. The licensee is distraught and publicly criticizes the board on social media, calling the decision unfair.





Self-Compassion Journaling Example

Step 1: Reflect on the situation

- "I feel guilty that I may have contributed to the licensee's distress."
- "I keep replaying the decision and wondering if I could have handled the hearing differently."
- "I'm frustrated that the veterinary members see the board as harsh or uncaring."





Self-Compassion Journaling Example

Step 2: Mindfulness

- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Sadness





Self-Compassion Journaling Example

Step 3: Common Humanity

- "Many people in positions of responsibility experience doubt and guilt after making difficult decisions."
- "It's normal to feel conflicted when balancing fairness, public safety, and compassion."
- "Others in my field have felt judged publicly this is part of being human and accountable."





Self-Compassion Journaling Example

Step 4: Self-Kindness

- "I acted according to policy and with integrity it's okay to feel conflicted."
- "It's human to feel guilt and frustration; it doesn't mean I failed."
- "I am doing my best in a challenging role, and it's okay to seek support."





Work-Life Separation



Ensure that there is time in the day when work is completely "turned off" so that other activities can be enjoyed and embraced





De-Role



- Close your email and shut down your computer with intention
- Take off your ID badge/name tag, work shoes, etc.
- Say your goodbyes to provide closure
- Use any personal ritual(s) to signify that work is done
- Make the commute home your final separation between work and home









Use Any Other Rituals to Signify Your Work is Done





Use Mental Health Resources

- EAP provided by veterinary medical association or employer
- Health insurance or health spending account
- Online private counseling (Better Help)
- Veterinary Hope Foundation peer support groups
- VIN Foundation Vets4Vets





Case Example

Scenario: After a disciplinary decision leading to license revocation, a board member feels guilt, sadness, and rumination.

"How might this board member process these emotions in a healthy way?"





Applying Healthy Coping Strategies

- Debrief with trusted peer or online group
- Journaling to "name to tame" emotions
- Self-compassion exercise
- Booking a counseling session





Key Takeaways

- Emotional toll is real and normal
- Caring for yourself sustains your ability to care for others





Building Sustainable, Compassionate Regulatory Culture







Organizational Responsibilities

- Normalize discussion of stress and moral distress
- Provide access to mental health resources
- Offer debriefs or peer support after challenging cases





Promoting Psychological Safety

- Open communication without fear of judgment
- Encourage questions and concerns about decisions or processes
- Leaders model vulnerability and self-care





Reducing Stigma Around Mental Health

- Language matters: use neutral, nonjudgmental terminology
- Share stories of regulatory colleagues who've sought help
- Policies that encourage access to counseling or EAP



Culture in Action

- Scheduled debriefs after hearings
- Peer mentorship programs
- Anonymous check-ins or mental health surveys





Audience Brainstorm

What's one change you'd like to see in your regulatory environment to support mental health and wellbeing?



Summary of Key Takeaways

- Regulatory work carries emotional weight for both licensees and regulators
- Compassionate communication reduces conflict and distress
- Tools exist to process moral stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout
- Organizational culture matters policies, psychological safety, and stigma reduction are key





Final Reflection

"One insight or action I'm taking from today is..."





Thank you so much!

- Member Services Team
- Conference Committee
- Dr. Venit







Want evidence-based wellbeing resources? Subscribe to the Reviving Vet Med newsletter!





Stay in touch!



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"Hit It Out of the Park!"

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