



# GEORGIA VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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## VIRTUAL TOWN HALL ON COVID-19

4/21/2020 Q&A

**Panelists:**

- **Holly Pounders** - *Mental Health First Aid Certified Instructor*
- **Dr. Laura Smallwood** - *GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair*
- **Ashley Tolleson, PhD, LPC, NCC** - *Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University*
- **Dr. Justin Toth** - *GVMA President Elect and Practice Owner, Dallas Highway Animal Hospital*

For the past 6 weeks, practice owners and practice leadership have been forced to implement unprecedented changes in the workplace in order to keep workers and pet owners safe and also just to keep the doors open. As the situation has evolved, safety protocols and operational changes have occurred on a daily basis. As protocols change, so did demand. Wellness and nonessential services have been reduced while urgent and emergency care centers saw a rapid increase. Our first set of questions will address issues related to adapting to this rapid change.

**Q:** **Can you address the way that this rate of change can impact mental health and personal strategies for working with that?**

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

I first want to start by talking about the Suicide Hotline and the Georgia Crisis Line because as we are talking about some of the things, I know people are expressing overwhelming stress. If you need to reach out to someone to support you in the immediate, you can call:

- Suicide Hotline 1-800-273-8255
- GA Crisis Line 1-800-715-4225 (can also test them by texting Hello to 741741)

These are incredibly challenging time and everyone is doing their best to cope with a chronically stressful situation. This is being described as a shared trauma and everyone reacts to these types of stressful situations differently.

- It is important for you personally to recognize your stress reactions and your coping methods. The more you are able to recognize your patterns or you “go tos,” it will be helpful for you to determine what kind of tailored self care plan you need.



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- If you are feeling overwhelmed, tired, fatigued at certain parts of the day—you may need to find ways to nurture yourself throughout the day (take a walk, meditate, take a nap, connect with someone, etc.).

**Q:** Practice owners and practice leaders play an essential role in this change management and how it impacts workers—what should leadership be focused on at this time?

**(Dr. Laura Smallwood—GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair)**

The path we have been on for the past 6 weeks have necessitated unprecedeted changes in the workplace.

- It is important to understand that this has been stressful to everyone. As leaders, how we communicate and what we communicate is super critical at this time. Even if we have to navigate difficult and sometimes quite painful decision making, we should keep in mind that our top priorities are to keep workers safe and to do what we can do to keep people sustainably employed so we can continue to provide needed care to our animal patients.
- We should be doing everything we can to support the wellbeing of our workers at this time by communicating clear expectations for safety and wellbeing both in and out of the workplace.
- We should hold people accountable for the safety of themselves and others and providing them what they need to do their job.
- It is also essential to maintain open lines of communication so employees can come to leadership when they have concerns.

**(Dr. Justin Toth, GVMA President Elect and Practice Owner, Dallas Highway Animal Hospital)**

- Give them stability in the workplace and show them they matter.
- Show them the workplace is a safe place. Explain why temperature checks are necessary so people understand. We are providing PPE to keep you safe because you matter.
- All those steps communicate that you do care.

**Q:** Navigating this level of change can take a toll on those in leadership positions—it is easy to become overwhelmed by the magnitude of keeping workers safe and how much those things change. How would you suggest that leadership work with these feelings of being overwhelmed? How do you turn it off?

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**



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This is really challenging—making these painful decisions or feeling you're not doing enough is overwhelming.

- First and foremost--offering yourself some compassion and remind yourself that we're all doing the best we can with what we know in making these difficult choices.
- Remind yourself that this situation is not anyone's fault. It's not selfish to take a break or create boundaries and prioritizing your physical and mental health so you can be your best self to support not only the animals that you serve and families that you serve but also the workers that work with you.
- Reaching out for support from colleagues can help normalize some of these feelings and decrease feelings of isolation and excessive guilt.

**Q:** **Stress and worry result in distraction and can lead to mistakes. How can those in leadership hold employees accountable for mistakes while still remaining empathetic about the stress that everyone is under?**

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

- Act compassionately—when people feel validated and understood, they perform better at work.
- Connect before you correct—try to validate and understand someone's experience before offering feedback.
- Set up regular times for people to connect, share what's going on with them and get feedback on some strategies for people to do better.
- Be honest and transparent and try to create more of a team perspective.

**Q:** **Veterinary work requires close contact between employees. Despite the appropriate safety measures, there might be an underlying fear of being exposed to COVID-19 without being able to distance 6 feet. For people with chronic anxiety, this can be increasingly difficult.**

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

What's important to note is the key difference between anxiety and stress.

- Anxiety is a loss of control that may arise from over-worrying. The fear of being exposed is very valid but we have to be careful not to focus on the "what if's."
- instead focus on what you are within our realm of control. Don't focus on things that you can't control—you can't control the actions of others but you can control your own safety and health habits.



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**Q:** **For some people, anxiety escalating can trigger panic and sometimes panic attacks—can you comment on how we should respond in the workplace to someone who is experiencing a panic attack in the workplace?**

**(Holly Pounders, Mental Health First Aid Certified Instructor)**

Panic attacks are actually becoming more common right now. Data shows us that 1 in 5 will experience one in our lifetime regardless of our mental health status.

- You should be reassuring, be caring, be compassionate.
- Remain calm—go somewhere private.
- Talk to them in a calm reassuring voice.
- Acknowledge that their fears are real.
- Let them know that you are going to stay with them and that it should subside in about 10 minutes.
- You can do some breathing techniques. Keep in mind that symptoms are similar to a heart attack—they have that fear because they fear that they are dying.
- Try to refocus their attention by getting them to count things, focus on other things but the big thing is to try to help them with their breathing to calm themselves.

**Q:** **Can you speak to measures that we can take in the workplace to mitigate fear?**

**(Dr. Laura Smallwood—GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair)**

- Communicate factual and evidence based information. Base decisions on scientific evidence to assure employees that what we're doing make sense.
- Listen to employee concerns about safety and address them.
- Hold people accountable for keeping the workplace safe from infection including holding people accountable for their actions outside of the workplace—that they must socially distance, take care of themselves, take their temperature before work and don't come to work ill.
- Encourage employees to pay attention to what they consume in the way of media—I encourage them to ask these questions about the media that they consume:
  - Do I know that this is even true?
  - Will it be helpful to me in the choices I have to make in this moment?
  - Encourage a limited intake of media (especially broadcast media) with disturbing images.
- Abide by the practice of non-harming speech—while we can pick and choose what we partake in in the way of media, we cannot “unhear”



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what people say. I don't think we can estimate what someone else is going through. It is important to be cautious not to exacerbate their suffering with the careless sharing of some story. The test is to Ask yourself if you know beyond a shadow of a doubt if what you are about to share is true, ask yourself if there is any chance that it could it be harmful for someone to hear right now and to ask yourself if the comment is really necessary in making the choices we need to make at this time?

**(Dr. Justin Toth, GVMA President Elect and Practice Owner, Dallas Highway Animal Hospital)**

Use some light humor—during a surgery, don't talk about any topic that has anything to do with the pandemic. This lightens the mood and helps us normalize things. Go to some light humor and things that aren't related to the pandemic.

**Q:** Many veterinary workers are having their hours reduced or being furloughed as a result of practices reducing hours or closing. The resulting financial stress in combination with the isolation and disconnection associated with social distancing—all of this difficult for people who struggle with depression. For people who suffer from chronic or relapsing depression, this can be an especially challenging time. What do you recommend for people who are experiencing worsening depression in the face of these challenges, particularly if they are experiencing feelings of hopelessness? And what would you say to people who might be suffering from depression for the first time in light of these challenges?

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

It is first important to outline what depression can look like and then reiterating how that it looks different for everybody. So some might have a different combination of symptoms than somebody else and it's important to be aware what's coming up for you.

In general, typical signs of depression are

- sad,
- irritable,
- apathetic,
- a loss of joy in things you once found pleasurable,
- feeling indifferent,
- having issues concentrating,



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- withdrawing or isolating yourself in the context of this quarantine (what that can look like is not reaching out to others or ignoring calls and texts and isolating yourself).
- having difficulty falling or staying asleep,
- not feeling motivated,
- feeling generally very fatigued.

What I find in my practice that is helpful for those struggling with depression is to

- focus on very small manageable goals. So, the hope here is that eventually you can create enough momentum to build up that hope to make more progress in the actions that you are able to do.
- having that compassion and grace for yourself and knowing that you are struggling right now but figuring out what are some very small steps that you can take each day to keep moving to get through the day and build momentum. So, for example focusing on something as simple as taking a shower every day, so, having that time to take care of yourself for personal hygiene and to reflect and have some self soothing sensory experiences with the water in a way a shower can be taking care of yourself but is a task that might be very difficult in the midst of depression.
- Taking time to call or text a friend/family member would be important as connection mitigates isolation, which is a big factor in depression. The more you can stay connected with people, the more you can ask them to hold you accountable for check ins so if you have a friend or family member that can check in with you every other day and just say 1-10, where you at today? If you're at a 5 and your friend knows she needs distraction, let's talk on the phone, let's watch a show on Netflix today online. Have a protocol for when you reach those higher numbers, it's an emergency and maybe we need to talk about safety planning, contacting a professional, reaching out to the suicide hotline which I'm sure Holly is going to talk about in just a second.
- Focusing on some small measurable tasks that you can build momentum for each day, which eventually gives you that hope that you feel, might be lost right now.

**Q: How should we respond in the workplace if we believe someone is at risk of harming themselves?**

**(Holly Pounders, Mental Health First Aid Certified Instructor)**

Now one of the key things, from a MHFA standpoint, is seeing changes in this person would be an alert. Then ask them - don't be afraid to reach and say "hey, are you ok? Is something bothering you?"



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Anything you would like to talk about or even asking the scary question of are you contemplating suicide and many times individuals who have contemplated suicide will tell us that I could not reach out and ask somebody for help but fortunately someone asked me. Just asking can be a huge deterrent, just the fact that someone noticed and was brave enough, because it is not an easy thing to ask and we are talking about this from a layperson but remember that we are all going through stressful times.

Be kind, be considerate, be watchful, and do not be afraid to ask. And I will say if you are afraid to ask and you are in the workplace, then go to a coworker and say I'm concerned about this person. Go to the leadership or use some of those resources that Dr. Tolleson talked about. The national suicide hotline you can call the GA Crisis Line and just ask for advice if the person themselves is not willing to call.

- Do not be afraid to reach out,
- do not be afraid to ask and
- show that you care and that you are concerned about a person.

It is a very hard thing when we talk about suicide. As Dr. Tolleson was saying this is a time that is creating a lot of depression in folks and we know that

- people are depressed,
- there is a higher rate of suicide, so
- it's important for all of us to talk to each other and do that reaching out.

**Q:** Our next topic of social distancing from pet owners is to reduce the risk of veterinary workers being exposed and that is being observed in most veterinary workplaces. In most practices, pet owners are not allowed in the building or only allowed in the building under certain circumstances. This has drastically affected how many veterinarians are able to perform euthanasia out of concern for safety, practices modifying the euthanasia protocols including such measures as requiring our team to wear PPE, limiting the family to one individual coming in and limiting the time that the individual can be with their beloved pet when they say goodbye. This is a very difficult situation - not only for the pet owner but for the veterinary team to experience these constraints from precluding our normal expression of empathy, compassion and care. Can you offer some suggestions for how veterinary caregivers can navigate this very difficult and unfamiliar terrain for us?

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**



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That is incredibly difficult and I can only imagine what that is like to go through.

- I think at first thought acknowledging and expressing your feelings is going to be the most important step here. There is only so much that we can control within the situation which makes it so difficult.
- A lot people feel helpless when they are not able to do would like to what they wish they could. If you are able to acknowledge feelings and the pet owners and talk them through what is going to happen, why it is happening this way, offer some sympathy and support. It might look like taking some extra time to have those conversations but that would go a long way.
- I think for the veterinary workers that are having to go through this themselves, beyond having to get through it and finding containment in the moments, is similar to the coke bottle analogy where you have a coke bottle and you shake it up and this builds up the pressure. When you finally let it out, it explodes. What we can do prevent the explosion, which in this analogy would be all of our pent up feelings understandably is to slowly release it over time and release that stress over time.
- In these challenging circumstances, I would again suggest acknowledgement and expression of these feelings. So that would be connecting with other people to help validate your experience, normalize the feelings that you're going through and find ways to release some of that stress and tension.
- I think the more that we try to ignore the signs of stress and overwhelm and overextend ourselves, it tends to make the stress and feelings worse and then we are not able to do the best jobs that we can to show up for the people that we care about at work and at home.

**Q:** **Can you comment on how practice leaders might support the veterinary caregivers around this issue?**

**(Dr. Laura Smallwood—GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair)**

This is a difficult issue. We had to make safety informed changes to our euthanasia protocol and I will say that the process of coming up with the protocol was the most emotionally difficult thing we had to navigate in the course of this. It was difficult for everyone because whatever you do it will change this experience drastically.

I think it is especially important to listen to the concerns of doctors and staff as we balance safety and emotional concerns and to come up with a good enough protocol. I think also as Dr. Tolleson alluded to, we have to acknowledge the feelings around this, acknowledge the best we can do in this situation still is not



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ideal and also I think it's important that this is temporary. I think we can feel like we are embedded in some permanence here, but this is a temporary situation that we will get through.

**(Dr. Justin Toth, GVMA President Elect and Practice Owner, Dallas Highway Animal Hospital)**

There is no good answer here and it helps to know it is just a temporary issue and I continue to struggle with this. I would normally tell my clients, "I'm here to hold your hand or hug your neck or let you cry on my shoulder during one of the worst days of your life" and I can't do that and it's tough. I've been very fortunate in the last 4-6 weeks to have fewer than average euthanasias. I have not had to deal with it as much as I usually would and they are tough. You read stories around the world of human loved ones dying alone in a hospital because their family cannot go into the hospital. There are a lot of sacrifices being made and it's very difficult. No, I don't have a magic answer either other than to say "This too shall pass".

**Q:** Our next topic is the financial impact of COVID-19 affect and the increasing number of pet owners across the state of Georgia having to face financial limitations to the level of care that they can offer to their pets. This mismatch between what is best for the patient and what is affordable to the pet owner can lead to significant stress to the caregivers. Can you offer some suggestions to these caregivers that are finding themselves in navigating this moral dilemma that they are capable of providing care but not being able to do so? **(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

That is such a conflict. I think that I might categorize this as moral distress to be honest. My own research has been around moral stress and mental health therapists and I think what I have found is that the importance of individual and community support is at the crux of this issue. Because again, there are so many limitations to what we are able to do and control. It is important to recognize the systemic issues here influencing these tough decisions. It is bigger than us. From a practical perspective, you're being limited in doing your job and how you would choose to do things and that's outside of your control. Reminding yourself again this is not your fault and you are doing the best you can and offering yourself that compassion and I would suggest using a team approach to making some of these decisions when talking through what some of these protocols can look like and the level of care that you are able to give. The more you are able to consult, the better but to have that support from colleagues and team members can help lessen the emotional impact some of these decisions may have.



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**Q: In what ways has COVID-19 affected the emotional and mental health of veterinary profession?**

**(Dr. Laura Smallwood—GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair)**

This is a good question. Unfortunately, we do not know the answer to that yet. We can only guess based on what we know how stress - particularly sustained stress - may or may not impact mental health, depending on how individuals respond to that stress.

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

This is tough. We can make some guesses about what the lasting impact will be and imagine it's going to call for systemic wide changes.

- First and foremost, needing to destigmatize mental health and create more resources and opportunities for supporting veterinary workers would be important. I think systemic wide changes and mental health are going to be an integral part of the workplace.
- This is creating some lasting stress and though we can find some relief in having quarantines eventually lifted, I think the impact will be long-term and so we will begin to learn to cope with this and that will have to extend to the workplace.
- We really need to focus on individual ways to manage our own feelings, develop coping tools and utilize resources and support networks.
- From the top down perspective, how can we offer resources and education about mental health to our employees and how can we set up regular ways to check in with each other and monitor everyone's well-being will most likely need to be incorporated as we look at the long lasting impacts of this.

**Concluding Remarks:**

**(Ashley Tolleson, Ph.D., LPC, NCC—Licensed Counselor & Instructor, Georgia State University)**

- In general, the message I want to relay is of compassion, not just for yourself but for others and letting that really inform your actions and your decision making.
- This is a time of high stress for everybody and we are all doing the best we can and managing the best we can.
- Offer each other some grace and offer ourselves some grace.



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- As you mention some of the positives and silver linings, I hope that we come out of this more connected and more aware. This will really feel that we are going through this as a team and that we will have more tools in our toolkit.
- Developing those self-care skills so that when other stressors come up, and they will, as life does, we will be more prepared and more connected to handle them.

**(Dr. Laura Smallwood—GVMA Past President and Wellbeing & Resilience Committee Chair)**

- This is the time for kindness and compassion in the workplace.
- In practicing kindness and compassion is this idea of assuming positive intent in other people. Everybody is struggling right now and sometimes we think we are doing our best but our best may not be what it needs to be in the moment.
- Having some empathy for people at this time and it is also very important to pay attention, notice when somebody is struggling and needs some help.
- I think in terms of our personal behavior responding in ways and choosing behaviors that do not harm others. I come back to this piece about speech because I feel that we can do so much harm unintentionally through what we say and just taking a moment and ask yourself if this is true and am I certain it won't harm anybody and is it really necessary for me to say this at this time.

**(Holly Pounders, Mental Health First Aid Certified Instructor)**

- One of the things I always talk about in my training is words matter, and our words do matter in how we say things and how we talk to people and I want to reiterate what everyone else is saying be kind caring and compassionate to others and to ourselves.
- We talk about this being stressful times but for some people this is traumatic and we know that trauma is the #1 risk factor for mental illness, for all of us. So, we can look to the future and we will learn new ways and I want to make folks aware of some other resources that are out there not just for crisis but if you just need someone to talk to. There is a great organization – the Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network - has a peer-to-peer line if you need someone to talk to and that number is 1-888-945-1414.

Also, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health has started an emotional support line for COVID-19, and the number is 866-399-8938. The folks that answer these lines are not professionals but they are kind caring



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individuals, some of whom have experienced mental health problems themselves. So, spread that word too, that if you do not have someone who does reach out to you and you need to reach out use one of these lines if you need some support and some help.