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Investigating Veterinarians' Interest in Mental Health

Cover Page Footnote

We thank The American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) Task Force for their contribution to the development of questionnaires.

Investigating Veterinarians' Interest in Mental Health

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Abstract

Stress affects all individuals, though individuals' responses to stressors can differ. When stress is not managed effectively, it can lead to severe physiological concerns as well as psychological damages such as depressive symptoms and even suicidal ideations. Veterinarians are known to have a higher depression level and suicide rate than the general population, which could be attributed to higher occupational stress. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the mental health state of veterinarians and the relationship between psychological distress and the pursuit of mental health resources. We also explored the relationship between psychological distress and the perceived importance of mental health

issues. A total of 447 veterinarians from around the United States participated in this study. They completed a series of questionnaires to better understand the overall perception and state of mental health for veterinarians. Overall, the current psychological distress of the sample was low, but with increased psychological distress, there was also the acknowledgment of a positive increase in the importance of mental health and seeking mental health resources. Older veterinarians in the sample did not perceive mental health or seeking mental health resources as important compared to younger veterinarians. This study fills gaps in previous research and brings clinical implications that can bolster veterinary medicine and the professional field.

Keywords: veterinarians, psychological distress, mental health

Investigating Veterinarians' Interest in Mental Health

Mental health is defined as “a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society” as well as the use of “basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one’s own emotions, as well as empathizing with others” (Galderisi et al., 2015, p. 231-232). In a broader term, mental health is an individual's ability to cope with difficult life situations while continuing to keep a balanced relationship between their body and mind. There is an increased acceptance of the importance of mental health and an increased need for information about mental health. A systematic literature review found that the public’s knowledge about mental health has increased; however, there are remaining concerns that the attitudes of the public toward mental health, or finding help for mental health issues, still need improvement (Schomerus et al., 2012).

The attitude about living with mental health issues or relying on help from others or professionals to subside mental health illnesses is still viewed negatively. This general gap between mental health awareness or knowledge and attitude toward mental health issues could imply that employees may not feel comfortable asking for help to cope with their mental health in their workplace. This is concerning for multiple reasons. Mental health is important for physical health, life satisfaction, and overall well-being. Based on positive physical and psychological foundations, mental health is related to many critical outcomes at work, such as job satisfaction, job performance, and job burnout (Nadinloyi et al., 2013). Recent trends at the workplace show that mental health concerns and their importance are openly discussed, and some positive changes were made in terms of company policies and constructing positive

cultures with maintenance and mental well-being becoming a key priority (Greenwood & Anas, 2021). Along with the recent change in mental health concerns in the workplace, there has been an uprise in the acknowledgment of mental health and its importance in veterinary medicine. There is still some increase in mental health awareness in the field, although it may not be moving as quickly as other companies and occupations.

However, as recent generations have joined the workforce in veterinary medicine and followed the trends of the rest of the working class in America, recent generations of veterinarians have begun to value their mental well-being more than previous generations. Nevertheless, stigmatization and lack of knowledge with respect to mental health continue to persist in the veterinary medical field. This lack of awareness could stem from the lack of education on the issue in the veterinary curriculum, which could explain the strong mental health stigma in the veterinary career field. Previous generations of veterinarians are still working in the field. Still, they may not have been taught that mental health is important, whereas the recent generations have had more interest in mental health issues. As the recent generations of veterinarians are integrating into the workforce, they are combating an environment that may not recognize their mental health as important.

As one can expect, the stigma around mental health negatively impacts veterinarians' self-assessment of mental health, which is one of the key risk factors around veterinarians and suicide (Fink-Miller & Nestler, 2018). These stressors can lead to a higher likelihood of developing clinical depression and even increased suicide risks (Stetina & Krouzecky, 2022). If veterinarians do not view their mental health as a priority at their jobs, or if there is no culture to embrace the importance of mental health, then they may fail to monitor the psychological impacts of their occupation and their levels of stress and psychological distress. Thus, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between stress and depression levels of veterinarians as well as their understanding and acknowledgment of the importance of mental health.

Stressful Nature of Veterinary Medicine

Like any other occupation, veterinary work is rewarding but highly stressful. The veterinary industry is competitive, highly demanding, and involves unpredictable work hours. The work of veterinarians can be emotionally taxing due to working with ill animals, which sometimes leads to their death and their owners. Previous research has found that euthanasia is a factor in increasing depression in veterinarians. A study showed that the greater number of

procedures that include euthanasia was associated with veterinarians' higher depression levels, which predicted higher suicide risk (Tran et al., 2014).

The need to further understand specific veterinary occupational stressors and depressive factors has led to the development of research tools for specific veterinary stressors. The veterinarian-specific stressors assessed in the past research found that one stress factor of veterinarians is the daily emotional demands, which was more specifically defined as having to perform euthanasia (Andela, 2020). Another study focusing on veterinarians in the United Kingdom used The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards indicator tool to measure seven stressors that could be apparent in the workplace. Of the seven stressors, veterinarians self-reported feeling more negatively about these factors (managerial support, peer support, relationships, demands, etc.) than the general population (Bartram, 2009).

Past studies show stressors specific to veterinarians lead to higher psychological distress and further stress on individuals working in this profession. Veterinarians could be facing higher stress in their occupation than those in the general population, and this warrants a better understanding of the impact of veterinarians' psychological distress on improving mental health at work.

Stress and Depression Among Veterinarians

Unmanaged stress or chronic stress could lead to the development of depressive symptoms and clinical depression, which sometimes could lead to the unfortunate decision of suicide. Although depression is common, Madsen et al. (2017) noted that a clinical diagnosis for depression was not seen very often in past research because investigators used self-report scales with no corroboration with professional clinicians' observations. With the lack of collaboration with clinical professionals, the self-report type scale may not have been a sensitive measurement of the depression levels of these individuals. There could have been dishonesty or unawareness of depressive symptoms in their self-reports that made it seem that their depression levels were not severe enough to meet a clinical diagnosis. Although a clinical diagnosis was not able to be made because of a lack of observation, self-report scales are still useful to assess individuals' non-clinical depressive symptoms.

Previous research has indicated that compared to the general population, veterinarians are in a worse mental health condition and show a four-time higher suicide rate (Hanrahan et al., 2018). Depression and stress can build over time, and inadequate stress management could lead to suicidal thoughts and suicidal ideation among veterinarians, particularly if there is a lack of understanding of mental health issues and/ or mental health stigma is present. A longitudinal

study from 1979-2015 analyzed veterinarian death records of 11,620 individuals, and results found that of those deaths, 398 were from suicide, which was considered a significantly higher rate compared to suicide rates in the general population (Tomasi et al., 2019). A systematic review examined the difficulties of mental health within Norwegian veterinarians. Results showed that of 746 veterinarians who considered themselves needing help, only 54 percent of them sought help (Dalum et al., 2022). With little, although growing, research for United States veterinarians, Dalum and colleagues' work brings light to the difficulties of mental health and the relationship veterinarians have with their own job-related stress.

Lack of Understanding of Personal Mental Health

Research has found that the understanding of psychological disorders such as depression in previous generations of adults is behind the extensive research regarding the population of recent generations of adults (Hantke & O'Hara, 2020). Considering the possible differences between generations and their attitude towards mental health, it is important to understand the generational differences in this aspect. According to a recent study, four generations are currently in the workforce. These include Baby Boomers (born between the 1940s-1960s), Generation X (born between 1965 - 1980), Millennials (born between 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997-2015) (Jones et al., 2019). As mentioned previously, there is a disconnect between perceived mental health importance between generations in veterinary medicine, which could have stemmed from general awareness of the importance of mental health. Veterinary medicine has slowly integrated mental health concerns into its educational curriculum.

Dickson (2019) found that end-of-life issues were not necessarily made a priority in the twentieth-century curriculum; there was more emphasis on this issue in the twenty-first-century curriculum, but there was still not enough to make veterinarians comfortable enough to know how to deal with these factors in a healthy way. The individuals involved in 20th-century education can include mostly Baby Boomers and Generation X. Millennials and Generation Z can still be considered to be involved in 20th-century education. Still, a large majority of Generation Z was involved in the education of the 21st century. Mental health negatively impacts veterinarians of all generations, but each generation might understand its importance differently. About half as many baby boomers (28%) responded that it was important that an employer or company culture support the mental health of their employees compared to millennials (59%). Survey results showed that Millennials and Generation Z have either left a job voluntarily or involuntarily due to mental health reasons (MindShare Partners, 2019).

With this information in mind, there is a general trend in the Millennials and Generation Z population. However, a part of 20th-century education has stepped forward in talking about their mental health and advocating for it on the job. Considering the slow changes in veterinary medicine education and the fast development of a mental health awareness culture, it is imperative to notice the trends in recent years with Millennials and Generation Z and their mental health acknowledgment in the workplace. In addition, it is important to understand how these trends are seen in veterinary medicine. This inefficient curriculum could be another reason for the need for further research. An interview study of 21 veterinarians shared their concerns that some veterinary medicine programs do not adequately prepare individuals working in veterinary medicine for specific work-related stressors (Platt et al., 2012). With this lack of learning, veterinarians are being sent into the workforce with little information about dealing with a stressor that only they can understand. The following section discusses gaps in the literature about previous generations of veterinarians. Based on this distinction, in the current study, previous generations will be considered participants in Generation X and Baby Boomers, giving an age range of 44-87 years. Those participants who are millennials or part of Generation Z will be considered as recent generations, giving an age range of 43 or less in this category.

Though there is some research about recent generations of veterinarians, there is a gap in research about previous generations and the increased stigma of personal mental health from previous generations. Perceived social stigma against mental health disorders by previous generations can limit their help-seeking activities regarding increasing their own mental health (Preville et al., 2015). The stigma around mental health and mental health practices in previous generations is prevalent in all populations, including veterinary medicine. Along with the increase of stigma around mental health in previous generations, veterinary medicine induces stigma practices as well, especially in previous generations of veterinarians, as mental health has not been made a priority in the field for those generations. Past research mentioned previously has stated how stress and depression have affected veterinarians or the amount of stigma that occurs in the field. Still, there seems to be limited research that allows veterinarians to describe in detail how they feel their mental health is viewed by themselves and others in the workplace. The current study aims to assess veterinarians' attitudes towards mental health and the stigma around it in their work environments. This can allow researchers to gain insight into how mental health may be viewed in the workplace and how it may directly affect veterinarians.

Over the past 10 years, mental health has been a burgeoning research topic in the veterinary field. Veterinarians are undoubtedly vulnerable to a variety of mental health

challenges. For instance, they are 2.8 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population (Tomasi et al., 2019). Some studies in certain areas of the country have discovered rates of depression are high at 66% (Skipper & Williams, 2012). However, there is little research literature on understanding veterinarians' mental health status and their concerns, especially for large-animal veterinarians. Some studies have attempted to include this population of veterinarians but with minimal success. This research explores variables relating to the mental health of large-animal veterinarians. The current study aims to understand better veterinarians' overall perception and state of mental health. Therefore, the results of this survey may provide the field with a fuller picture of the perception of mental health and the mental health state of veterinarians in the field and fill gaps in the literature.

Research Questions

1. Is there a negative influence of veterinarians' psychological distress on their ability to carry out their expected job responsibilities?

Past studies show the negative impact of psychological distress on job performance in general. Based on past studies, we investigate a similar pattern for veterinarians.

2. What is the influence of psychological distress level and age on their tendency to seek mental health resources?

Past studies found that even with increased psychological distress, there was little evidence to show an increase in mental health practices. The current study explores how psychological distress and age predict the pursuit of mental health practices.

3. What is the influence of psychological distress and age on the perceived importance of the mental health issue?

Past studies show age differences regarding mental health issues. The current study explores the relationship between age and psychological distress and how they impact an individual's perception of the importance of mental health.

4. How do practice responsibilities (i.e., private vs. non-private practice ownership) impact veterinarians' psychological distress?

Gaining information on the difference between private and non-practice veterinarians is imperative. This information from these two groups can provide insight into how each may acknowledge their mental health. This information could also bring forward information that could be used to assess more specific resources for each group that could elevate their mental health practices and acknowledgment of their own mental health.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited from a mailing survey sent out by researchers to veterinarians across the United States. The American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) has around five thousand members, and participants were recruited from the AABP website (<https://www.aabp.org/>). The study was posted on the AABP website, and a recruiting email was also sent to AABP members. A total of 447 veterinarians (men=186, women=211, other=6, no response=44; Age Mean = 44.73, Age SD = 15.01) participated in this study. Most participants were White (85%) and Hispanic (1.5%). There was about 10% with no response about race information. The participants showed diverse backgrounds regarding years of experience since graduation (with DVM or VMD). 31.1% graduated more than 25 years ago, 25.1% more than 27.9 years, and 24.6% had between 6-15 years. About 60% of the respondents owned a private practice (60.2%), 28.4% did not, and 11.4% did not respond to this question.

The majority of the participants were private practice owners (36.1%), followed by working as an employee at a private practice (30.6%) and in academia (16.7%). If they worked in a private practice environment, the size of the practice participants owned or were employed at also varied. The range of the number of practice owners was 1-12 (Mean = 2.22, SD = 1.88); the range of the number of employed veterinarians was 1-34 (Mean = 4.26, SD = 4.66); and the range of the staff including technicians and assistants was 1-125 (Mean = 8.64, SD = 13.74). All data collection processes and data maintenance were completed in accordance with ethical guidelines outlined by the APA and IRB. The Institutional Review Board approved this project at the authors' institution.

Procedure

The data were collected using Google Forms, and the survey link was shared on the AABP website with a protected firewall. Participants were ensured confidentiality of their responses and given the option to stop at any time during the study. Upon consenting to the study, participants were given a short questionnaire consisting of basic demographic questions (gender, ethnicity, age, etc.), a series of questionnaires assessing their attitude towards mental health, and Kessler 6 questions. Lastly, participants provided their responses on how mental health has impacted their job and indicated their current mental health care practices. The current study was part of a larger project that gathered information on veterinarians' perceptions of mental health as well as the mental health state of veterinarians in the field.

Materials

Kessler-6 Items

Kessler-6 items assess the frequency of non-specific psychological distress within a particular reference period (e.g., 30 days). The six items are summed to yield a total score, and a higher number (closer to 24) indicates higher psychological distress within the period. This short scale established good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$, Kessler et al., 2002). It is also known to accurately discriminate diagnosable vs. non-diagnosable cases (e.g., using DSM-IV) and makes it a useful screening instrument (Furukawa et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 2003). The Kessler-6 scale demonstrated good internal consistency with the current data (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

Impact of psychological distress on physical condition (self-constructed)

The four self-constructed items were used to determine the degree to which psychological distress impacts veterinarians' everyday work (e.g., being totally unable to work or carry out normal activities, Seeing a doctor or other health professional about these feelings). These items were generated by an AABP task force.

Seeking mental health resources (self-constructed)

Ten self-constructed items were used to assess participants' engagement in mental health care practices. These items were selected by an AABP task force to identify the mental health care practices of veterinarians. There was a wide range of activities included in the questions, ranging from discussing challenges with family/ friends reading self-help books to receiving mental health therapy and/ or taking psychiatric medications (e.g., I have attended self-care/mental health-related training and/or continuing education sessions).

Perceived importance of the mental health issue (self-constructed)

A single item was used to measure the perceived importance of mental health issues. It was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Not at all important, 5= Very important). This item was generated by the AABP task force.

Obstacles when seeking help or treatment (self-constructed)

Six self-constructed items were asked to find answers to obstacles when veterinarians sought help for mental health concerns. Obstacles included financial, psychological, and time-

related factors (e.g., No health care insurance, the time required to attend a session, stigma associated with mental health issues from colleagues, family, etc.). These items were selected by an AABP task force.

Results

The Kessler-6 items assessed the frequency of non-specific psychological distress within a particular reference period. The Kessler 6-item total score was relatively low in our current sample (Mean = 0.97 out of a possible maximum score of 4, SD = 0.73), and the results show our current participants did not have strong psychological distress at the time of data collection (see Table 1). Statistical analyses were conducted to find answers to our research questions.

Table 1.

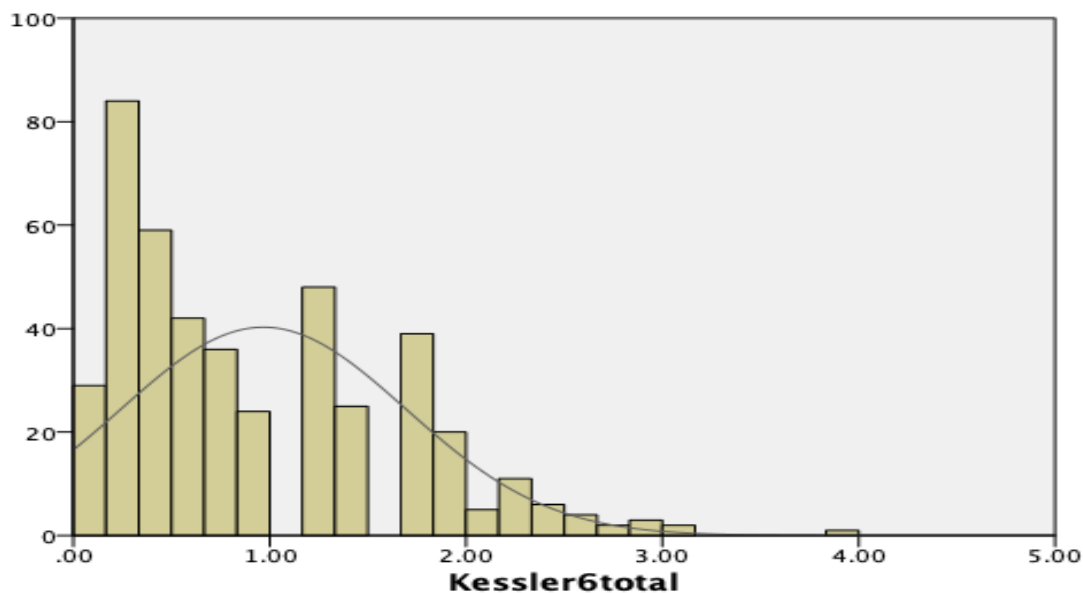
Experience of Negative Physical Condition.

During the past 30 days, how many days of 30 were you...(report # of days)	Mean	SD
Totally unable to work or carry out your normal activities	.43	2.65
Do only half or less of what you would normally have been able to do	1.12	3.03
See a doctor or other health professional about these feeling	.28	1.02
Have physical health problems been the main cause of these feelings	.61	.93

Is there a negative impact of veterinarians' psychological distress on their ability to carry out their expected job responsibilities?

To answer RQ1, the Kessler-6 scores were used to predict its impact on veterinarians' physical condition. As shown in Figure 1, results did not show strong evidence that stress interfered with their everyday life. However, the overall regression model was significant: $F(1, 433) = 217.14$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.33$. Results showed higher psychological distress predicted worse physical condition ($\beta = 1.06$, $t(433) = 14.74$, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 1.

Distribution of Kessler Total Score in the Current Sample**What is the influence of psychological distress level and age on their tendency to seek mental health resources?**

To investigate RQ2, a regression analysis was conducted with psychological distress and age as predictors and seeking mental health resources as an outcome. The overall model was significant: $F(2, 374) = 36.23$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.16$. Higher psychological distress predicted a greater tendency to seek mental health resources ($\beta = .32$, $t(374) = 6.13$, $p < .05$). Conversely, age negatively predicted seeking mental health resources, which means that previous generations of veterinarians were less likely to seek out mental health resources ($\beta = -0.15$, $t(374) = -2.83$, $p < .05$).

What is the influence of psychological distress and age on the perceived importance of the mental health issue?

To investigate RQ3, a regression analysis was conducted with age and psychological distress as predictors and the perceived importance of mental health issues as an outcome. The overall model was significant: $F(2, 389) = 34.44$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.15$. Higher psychological distress predicted higher perceived importance of mental health issues ($\beta = 0.31$, $t(389) = 6.07$, $p < 0.05$). Conversely, age negatively predicted the perceived importance of mental health

issues, which means that previous generations of veterinarians were less likely to consider mental health as important ($\beta = -0.14$, $t(389) = -2.66$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, there was a moderate level of interest in mental health (Mean = 3.73, SD = .96, Min = 1, Max = 5), and veterinarians pointed out a few key obstacles. As shown in Table 2, mental health stigma was one of the strongest obstacles when seeking mental health help. This was a much higher rate than financial obstacles (42%).

Table 2.

Obstacles to seek psychological help at work.

What are the obstacles for you or someone within practice to seek help or treatment for a mental health condition?	%
Out of pocket cost	42.1
No health care insurance	10.3
Availability of provider for help/ treatment	48.1
Stigma associated with mental health issues (from colleagues, family etc.)	60.2

What is the impact of practice responsibilities (i.e., private vs. non-private practice ownership) on veterinarians' psychological distress?

To investigate RQ4, we conducted an independent t-test to compare the psychological stress level between private vs. non-private practice veterinarians. Results showed no difference between the two groups (Mean for the private group = 0.99, SD = 0.71; Mean for the non-private group = 0.92, SD = 0.73; $t(394) = 0.53$, $p = 0.60$). The number of owners of the practice was correlated with non-specific psychological stress. There was no correlation between the two variables, $r(263) = 0.05$, $p = 0.42$, nor the number of veterinarians employed at the clinic, $r(263) = 0.02$, $p = 0.75$. Lastly, suggestions to the AABP to enhance members' mental health and well-being are reported in Table 3.

Table 3.

Suggestions to the AABP to Enhance Mental Health and Well-being of Members

Rate the following suggestions for what AABP can do to enhance mental health and wellbeing of members (ranges between 1-5).	Mean	SD
Training workshops or preconference seminars on self-care.	3.70	1.01
Training workshops or preconference seminars that educate on signs/symptoms of mental health issues and how to appropriately intervene for others and/or oneself.	4.00	.92
Webinars on self-care.	3.65	1.08
A service that aids in directing people to mental health services in their respective local areas.	3.91	.99

Discussion

Veterinarians have high demands that occur in their occupation, which can lead to difficulty coping with these responsibilities. These coping strategies can then have an effect on the outlook of their personal mental health as well. Mental health is coming to the forefront of all areas, but it has been a slower process for veterinary medicine. The current study fills a gap in the lack of large animal veterinary research regarding their mental health and their understanding of their own mental health. The research questions for this study were: (1) Is there a negative impact of veterinarians' psychological distress on their ability to carry out their expected job responsibilities? (2) What is the influence of psychological distress and age on their likelihood to seek mental health resources? (3) What is the influence of psychological distress and age on the perceived importance of mental health issues? (4) What is the impact of practice responsibilities (i.e., private vs. non-private practice ownership) and veterinarians' psychological distress? Results showed that there was not a negative impact regarding veterinarians' psychological distress and the effect it may have on their ability to carry out any responsibilities.

It was assessed that at the time of the survey, there was no evidence that stress or other psychological distress negatively impacted individuals' continuing their responsibilities. This is

an interesting finding because past studies have shown that increased stress can lead to difficulty with responsibilities. However, the current veterinarian sample in this study reported relatively low levels of psychological distress. This could be because veterinarians tend not to recognize mental health as something that affects their overall ability to finish their daily responsibilities, or the overall stress and psychological distress is not seen as important (Fink-Miller & Nestler, 2018). This shows how, based on our research question, the veterinarians involved in the study did not perceive their psychological distress as a factor that hindered their ability to accomplish their responsibilities. A cautious generalizability could be that they do not allow it to affect their overall ability to do their work or accomplish their responsibilities. This provides insight into the follow-up research questions about their perceived importance of mental health.

Overall, the veterinarians that we assessed showed higher tendencies to seek mental health resources if there were higher levels of psychological distress. So, although they did not perceive their current psychological distress as something that can hinder their ability to fulfill their responsibilities, it has been assessed that when there is that higher psychological distress, there would be a higher likelihood to seek mental health resources. As we have seen in a past study, previous generations of adults were less likely to seek mental health resources (Preville et al., 2015). This information is on track with the data gathered from the current study. It was found that previous generations of veterinarians were less likely to seek mental health resources, and this could be the case that previous generations of veterinarians may not recognize mental health as something that is important or something that can affect the completion of responsibilities.

Overall, the relationship between psychological distress and the perceived importance of mental health was significant. If an individual perceived that psychological distress was higher than mental health, it was seen as an important factor for that individual. Overall, based on the results, mental health was of moderate interest in the study. This follows the literature that focuses on the idea that overall, veterinarians did not have a big interest in their own mental health or in mental health in general, and it is a stigmatized topic in the veterinary community (Fink-Miller & Nestler, 2018).

Generally, one of the obstacles in the interest of mental health was the thought of seeking mental health resources and the stigma behind that, so although past results indicated that there is an overall perceived importance of mental health when psychological distress is higher, the stigma of actually gaining mental health resources is the most difficult part which could lead to loss of interest in the importance of their own mental health and mental health in

general. This confirms the literature that the stigma of mental health and seeking mental health resources in the veterinary community has been a common and recognized issue that degrades an individual's importance of their own mental health (Dalum et al., 2022). This was similar to the research that previous generations of veterinarians did not perceive mental health issues as important; however, it was also indicated that previous generations of veterinarians did not show higher levels of psychological distress. If psychological distress is lower than the perceived importance of mental health, it can also be assumed to be low because it may not be a pressing matter in the individual's life.

Lastly, no difference was found between private and non-private veterinarians regarding their psychological stress levels. There was also no difference between the number of owners in either practice type. This information is interesting because the first research question yielded results that the psychological distress level of the veterinarians was not stopping them from accomplishing any of their responsibilities. The overall sample of this study did not show that mental health was not a reason that inhibited veterinarians from performing their responsibilities. This information, paired with the specifics of practice ownership or practice type, continues to follow the trend that these factors did not affect psychological distress.

Limitations

The current sample of veterinarians had relatively lower levels of psychological distress; however, the self-reported response may have some limitations, and stress level was not directly measured. This study also did not measure any pre-existing depression levels in the sample. This information could be important to evaluate psychological distress as well. The likelihood that someone had depressive symptoms prior to the study may have increased their desire to seek mental health resources. In contrast, veterinarians with existing elevated depression levels may have tried therapy without successful results and doubt the effectiveness of treatment or have a stigma towards mental health, debilitating their ability to seek mental health resources. In this case, it is not the stigma that veterinary medicine places on mental health and seeking mental health resources but based on past experiences, which was not evaluated in this study. These aspects should be investigated in future studies.

Future research should examine factors that are associated with the age of veterinarians as they influence their likelihood to seek mental health resources or view mental health as an important issue. Another avenue of study could be that the number of years in the field, disregarding age, could be a reason for increased stress and depression levels and lack of seeking mental health resources. An increased number of years in the field could increase

specific veterinary medicine and general occupational stressors. Learned helplessness at a job through the years could explain the decrease in the perceived importance of mental health. Future research can use the quantitative information from this study and other questions to assess what veterinarians think they need to increase their perceived level of importance around mental health.

Additionally, more survey-based questionnaires should be used to gain more information on how veterinarians perceive this stigma around mental health or specific stressors that can increase stress and what that looks like and means to them so ways to combat that can be made. Though the current study found valuable information regarding the mental health of large animal veterinarians, these findings may not be generalized to small animal veterinarians. Thus, future research should include a study of small animal veterinarians who also have to build a working relationship not only with pets but also with pet owners. Small animal veterinarians, including the veterinarian, animal patient, and human client, frequently work in a triangle. This can increase expectations on small animal veterinarians, as seen in the recent growth of cultural trends in attitudes toward small animal pets (Hanrahan et al., 2018). With this in mind, the trends in Bovine veterinarians and mental health can be similar to those of small animal veterinarians. Still, they could also be different as expectations and specific stressors in small animal practices can also differ. Future research can continue to assess the implications of small animal veterinarians and their acknowledgment of the importance of mental health in their occupation.

Conclusion

This current study found that increased psychological distress predicted a greater chance of seeking mental health resources; however, previous generations of veterinarians were less likely to find mental health important or to seek mental health resources. With recent generations of veterinarians, results showed that higher levels of psychological distress led to an increased perceived importance of mental health in general. Mental health was also considered to be of moderate interest because veterinarians perceived mental health stigma as an obstacle to gaining mental health resources. This information further emphasizes that veterinarians may still hold a stigma around mental health, and it hinders their abilities to gain mental health resources.

The importance and interest of mental health only increases when there is an increase in psychological distress, but when everything seems to be going as planned, mental health and its importance may not be a thought. This study shows that although the importance of mental

health was found at the individual level, it needs to be studied at the organizational level as well. Mental health stigma tends to persist in the veterinary community, and this study investigated how veterinarians perceive the importance of their own mental health. With this continued stigma around mental health and mental health resources that past research and this study have found, a change needs to be made to bring forward a positive occupational environment for veterinarians to express their mental health and find resources to help themselves.

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