

Episode 16 | Vet Med Joy Stealers - Part 1

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How patients and clients become joy stealers in Veterinary Medicine, that's what we're talking about in Episode 16.

Welcome to the Joyful DVM Podcast. I'm your host, Veterinarian, and Certified Life Coach, Cari Wise. Whether you're dealing with the challenges in Vet Med, struggling with self-confidence, or you're just trying to figure out how to create a life and a career that you actually enjoy, you'll find encouragement, education, and empowering concepts, you can apply right away. Let's get started.

Hey, everybody! Welcome to Episode 16. I'm excited to get started on this episode because it's the first in a three-part series on Vet Med Joy Stealers. Today, we're going to be talking about how patient outcomes and client interactions often steal our joy. By the time we get finished with today's episode, you're going to understand why it is that those things impact us so much and also what opportunities they provide us that we can apply and use moving forward. So let's go ahead and get started.

Patient outcomes and client interactions. Most of us would definitely say those are two of the greatest things that ruin our days in Vet Med. Why is that? Well, simply because we would really prefer it if our patients always got better. I mean, let's face it. We're in this job so that we can help animals. And also so that we can serve clients. Most of us really wish we could just do the animal part and we didn't have to deal with the client-side. But as you guys well know, this job is as much about the clients as it is about the pets.

However, that being said, when the patients don't get better, we certainly have a bit of an emotional impact from that. And of course, we do. We're just humans. We actually care about the pets. And we do actually care about the humans too, which is why when patients don't get better or when cases don't turn out the way we anticipate that they will, we tend to have a lot of stress and anxiety around that. And even sadness and grief as well.

Now, why does that impact us so much? It's because we tend to measure our success or failure in this job on whether or not the pets get better. Yeah. Have you ever noticed that you're doing that? It makes perfect sense that we do and we're going to get into why in just a few minutes. But before we jump into that, let's take a look at the client-side, the client interactions. Why is it that when clients are grumpy and when clients make decisions that we don't necessarily support that we let that ruin our day? Why do we think that that is the cause of having a bad day in Vet Med? Many of us do.

Many of us think that what the clients say to us is the reason why we're unhappy in our

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jobs, all along with the patients that don't get better. Right? We think that when the patients don't get better, that's why we don't like our job. And that's why we're unhappy here. Maybe it's not universally unhappy. Maybe it's just any given day when you have a bad day at work and you say, "Why did I have a bad day? Or why was today a bad day?" Then the examples that you come up with often have to do with cases that didn't turn out well or client interactions that weren't positive and useful. What we want to be able to see here is that it's not those things that create a good or a bad day for us. Those things on their own actually don't have the power to do that. This is very important to understand because I can say myself, for sure, for years, did not understand what was actually happening, which is why I think it is so important that I share it with you.

For years and years, I believed that whether or not I had a good day was really dependent on how the patients turned out and how the clients interacted with me. And I would do everything in my power to assure the patients always had a positive outcome and that the client interactions were always useful and quite honestly fun and inviting and entertaining and joyful. Nobody wants to fight with a client. Nobody wants a client to be angry. And nobody wants a patient not to get better. What I believe for years and years was that if I controlled all the variables, meaning if I had my staff trained the right way, and if I was open the right hours, and if I practice the right kind of medicine that I could control the outcomes of all of those things, that I could better guarantee that the patients would get better and that the clients would be happy. What I didn't recognize was that patient outcomes are actually not something that I control and neither are client interactions.

So you and I can practice the best medicine possible. We can make all the right decisions when it comes to the diagnostic testing that we recommend, and then the diseases that we actually diagnose, and then the treatments that we either do in our hospitals or referrals and the medications given and all of that, we can make all of the right medical decisions. We can treat with all the right medications and some pets just aren't going to get better. Some pets just aren't going to get better. And it's when those pets don't get better, and we blame ourselves that we're really doing ourselves a disservice.

Why do we take it so personally, when the pets don't respond to treatment? It's because what we don't recognize is that we're measuring our own success in this profession by that variable. Pets that get better mean that you're doing it right. Pets that don't get better mean you're doing it wrong. It's completely displaced responsibility, but many of us don't recognize it. And so therefore when the things we can't control turn out a way that we

don't want them to, so the patient outcomes turn out poorly and we have a bad day, then we just need to start to recognize that our bad day, our unhappiness is at the effect of those things. So our happiness becomes at the effect of whether or not the patients get better.

The same thing is true on the client-side. You can do everything perfectly. You can have been running right on time with your appointments. You can be there immediately. You can listen to all of their questions. You can do a physical exam and gather a medical history and you can make recommendations. And the client can still come back and say something ugly to you. Many of us take this very, very personally. And oftentimes we get kind of stuck in these mind loops of, "I just can't do anymore. This is the best that I can do. Why can't they just be satisfied?" It becomes a constant kind of loop of a bit of blame and then a bit of defending all at the same time in our head. We really think that there just isn't anything else that we could possibly do and that we should be able to in order to have a different outcome. When the clients interact with us in a way that is not useful so in a way that's combative or grumpy, many of us, like I said, we take it very personally. And we think there's something that we could have done differently to prevent that from happening. This is where for a lot of us, the control freak nature pops in. All that control freak, Type A perfectionistic behavior. We think if we can control it all and get it all just right, that the clients won't do that. But we forget that humans will be humans, and we will never be able to predict their response and their interactions. Likewise, we have to try to remember that their response in their interactions is not our responsibility. We can't predict it and we can't control it either. This is all very good news. It may at first seem a little disheartening, especially if you have really been measuring your success in this profession with things like patients that get better and clients who are happy.

But I want to show you this takes a ton of pressure off of you when you start to realize that the patient outcomes are going to be what they're going to be. And that the clients are going to interact with you, the way that they're going to interact, and you don't have any control over that at all. The best you can do is just make the best decisions with the information and resources you have available at the time.

So what that means is that when you do your physical exam and you take your medical history and you make a medical recommendation, the client then gets to decide, and then whatever they've decided to do, you're going to use that to gather more information and to provide treatment. And then you're all going to just have to step back and wait and see how the pet responds. If the pet doesn't respond well, then there's more data to be gathered, right? When the pet doesn't respond well, that's an opportunity for you to have a conversation with the owner and to maybe make some different

recommendations. And perhaps at that point, they'll agree to something that they didn't agree to the first time around. And when you implement that, perhaps the pet gets better, then it perhaps it doesn't.

But all along the way, your role, whether you're a veterinarian or veterinary technician, your role is just to convey the best information. Your role is just to gather that information and to relay different things and suggestions for how to proceed. But the ultimate decision there becomes that of the owner.

We get into a bit of a trap here. This is a bit of a joy stealer, because a lot of the time, what we do is we give the best advice, and then they decline everything. We take their declining treatment personally. And underneath the surface, many of us believe that if we had just presented better, if we had done a better job that they would have said, yes. We have our value tied up in the decisions that those clients are making. That's not how this works. Your job is to do the best you can with the information and resources available. You're going to do a great physical exam and take a good medical history, make a solid medical recommendation, and then they get to decide how to proceed. Once they decide you're going to implement their wishes. And then we're going to wait and see how the pet responds. Now that pet may get better. And if a pet gets better than everybody's happy. We're happy because the pet got better. The owner's happy because the pet that they cared about got better. And in those moments, we may falsely start to believe that we're good at our jobs because of the patient that got better and the clients who are happy.

It's a trap, my friends. It's a trap that many, many of us fall into. I'm not saying don't celebrate your wins. Absolutely do. But also just be very aware of what part of the win you are personally responsible for. The initial data gathering and recommendation making, that's what you're responsible for. And then implementing whatever decisions the client made. But how that pet responded, completely out of your control because you can't control physiology. I think it's so important for us to remember this because when the pets don't get better, we often want to blame ourselves. But we forget in those moments, that physiology is not something that we control.

Vet Med joy stealers, they come in many shapes and sizes. And if one of the ways that you're measuring your success is whether or not the patients get better, I want you just to ask yourself why. Why is that the indicator that you've chosen? I'm going to help you out here too because I'm going to show you exactly why it happens.

All along the way, as we've gone through our veterinary educations, we've had some tangible means of being able to measure how we're doing. It started way back in grade school. You complete assignments, you get grades. You complete assignments, and then you take tests and you complete courses. You complete courses, you get degrees all the way up, right? You graduate from different levels of schooling to different actual degrees. All the way up into your veterinary or veterinary technician education and to get that final degree, pass that final big test and get that license. All along the way, there was a bit of a roadmap. All along the way, no matter how scared you felt or how uncertain you felt, you got feedback that said, "Yeah, you're doing fine". And that came in the form of those scores, those grades. And if those grades, weren't what you wanted them to be, then you were, adjusted your approach, and you went again. When we get out into the real world, all the grades disappear. We become responsible for grading ourselves. And in the absence of that tangible measure, we actually create those for ourselves. Patients getting better and clients who are happy, our way that we do that. But it's a dangerous road to go down.

It works really well until it doesn't. But as soon as somebody is unhappy and somebody's voicing their opinion about your services or about your abilities, as soon as a pet doesn't respond the way that you think it does, then the only place you have left to go is self-blame. We just want to create some awareness around this.

When it's all said and done, your joy in this career is available to you even when patients don't get better and clients are unhappy. Why and how is that even possible? It's because unhappiness and doubt and fear and uncertainty are emotions. And emotions always come from our own thinking. Other people can't create our emotions. The things outside of us can't create our emotions.

So I'm not saying that when a patient doesn't get better, that you shouldn't feel sad. I'm not saying that when a client is unhappy, that you shouldn't feel concerned. But what I am saying is we need to recognize that feeling sad and feeling concerned are not created because of the patient that didn't get better, or the client that was unhappy. Those emotions were created only by what we were thinking about the patient that didn't get better and the clients are unhappy.

It's a very powerful distinction to make because what this will help us to remember is that our emotional wellbeing is completely within our control. Even when things don't turn out the way that we want them to, we are still powerful. We still have the ability to make choices. If we don't remember that, if we truly believe that our emotional state is at the effect of the patients that get better and the clients who are happy or unhappy, then our

entire existence is just kind of at the effect of the world.

Our entire existence becomes the result of things that happen, that we can't control. I don't know about you, but that's not how I want to live my life. It's very refreshing for me to recognize that I can feel angry or I can feel embarrassed, or I can feel sad, and I can own my own emotions. When pets don't get better, yeah, I want to feel sad because it's an indication of how much I cared about that pet and how much I care about my job. But at the same time, I also recognize that I get to sit in that sadness only for as long as I choose to. That it's not permanent. That I don't have to stay there. That I can take a moment to grieve the situation, but then also adjust my thinking to, "Okay, and now what?" There are wins and there are lessons. And every time things don't go the way that we want them to, every time a patient doesn't get better, every time a client is unhappy, there is a lesson there for us. But if we're believing that we are the cause of all of their outcomes, then we're always going to miss the lesson. We need to learn to keep our eyes open. And to remember, we are not responsible for the world.

As much as we care about pets, as much as we care about clients, when it's all said and done, what we are actually able to control in any of those situations is minuscule. Our role here is to provide information. Our role here is to extend services, but ultimate outcomes are not something we can guarantee. We can do things a hundred percent right as far as the textbooks go and still have an outcome that wasn't favorable. That comes down to that physiology.

You just never know. You can say all the right things in the exam room. You can do all the right things as far as communicating with the client and the client can still be angry. Again, not something you can control. Understanding where your role is in this profession is so important. Many of us just believe that we are responsible for not only everything that happens with every animal that walks in the room, but then also everything that happens with those clients. That's just not our purpose. That is not our role.

So if you find that patient outcomes and client interactions are one of the biggest joy stealers for you, here's your take home. I want you to first remember that the way that you feel is created only by what you think. It is your sentences in your mind that create your emotions and you have the ability to adjust that. I also want you to remember that it's okay to feel sad. It's okay to feel stressed, but how long you stay there is a choice. Just because you feel stressed or sad or anxious doesn't mean it's permanent. It doesn't mean that it's a problem either. Emotions are 50-50 positive and negative. We're supposed to feel uncomfortable half of the time. But it's when we don't believe that, it's when we try to control everything to avoid the uncomfortable emotions of the

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uncomfortable situations, that it all becomes super overwhelming because we're trying to control things that we just absolutely have no power to control. Instead, our efforts are much better use just considering, "What is true for me. What is my role in this situation? What do I choose for myself next?"

If we can intentionally remember in those moments that our emotions are only created by our own thinking and that our emotions are not created by the things that happen outside of us, then that gives us the ability to choose differently when we're ready to move on. Otherwise, we'll remain stuck. And each of these situations where we feel some sadness or anxiety or regret will just continue to stack up and stack up and stack up as evidence that we're not doing this job right.

Don't let your emotions be the indicator of how successful that you are in this job. That is not the real indication. Truly my friends, how well you do this job is simply an opinion. And it's one that everybody will have a different opinion of. The only opinion that counts is yours. What other things people think and believe about you is none of your business because you can't change their thoughts. The only thoughts that matter about you are yours.

If you can just remember that every time you take action, you do the best that you can with the information and resources you have available, and if you can just remember that your motives are always good, then you can start to let go of the outcomes a little bit. We only hang onto the outcomes when we need those wins to prove to ourselves that we are worthy. I'm here to tell you you are worthy and the outcomes are something that you can let go.

Alright, my friends! That's going to wrap up part one of this three-part series on Vet Med Joy Stealers. Tune in next week for part two. I'll see you then.

Thank you for listening to the Joyful DVM Podcast. If you'd like to learn more about the concept and ideas discussed here, and how to apply them to your own life, to create confidence and empowerment for yourself, you'll love Vet Life Academy. To check it out and learn more, visit joyfuldvm.com/vetlifeacademy. And if you're loving this podcast, I'd appreciate it if you'd share it with your friends and leave us a review on iTunes.

We can change what's possible in VetMed together.