

Episode 38 | The Value of Embracing Emotion (and the fallout when you don't!)

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The emotional roller coaster and three things we're doing that are actually making it worse, that's what we're talking about in Episode 38.

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.

Hello, my friends. Welcome to Episode 38. Today, we're going to talk about the emotional roller coaster.

Many of us, in the veterinary profession and in our lives in general, we're not very comfortable with feeling our emotions. We're not very familiar with it. It's not something that we talk about in society on a regular basis, and so what happens is we draw conclusions about emotions and about what they mean from the conditioning we've received through our experiences of our lives. So all throughout our lives, we're getting feedback from people around us. It starts out with our parents and our teachers and our siblings, and then as we continue in our lives, we continue to take in feedback from everybody that we interact with. Part of that feedback that we take in is associated with how people react in emotional situations. So whether they are emotional and we are experiencing them, or we are emotional and they are experiencing us, or just watching two complete strangers - one of which is an emotional one who isn't - and seeing how they interact. As we take in that feedback, we draw conclusions.

There's a lot of societal conditioning around what's appropriate when it comes to emotion. This has led us to draw a couple of broad sweeping conclusions. One, being that displaying emotion is inappropriate, and then two, being people who display emotion must have something wrong with them. So you can imagine if we're living our lives with this kind of conditioning, how challenging it is to be in a profession where emotion is a regular occurrence. Of course, it is.

Now, if we think about the emotion and we think about our profession, we know emotion comes not only from the engagements with our clients and our patients but then also internally from ourselves. And so we recognize the emotional situations that we encounter when we're dealing with the public. But then we also struggle with our own emotions that are under the surface most of the time, and then sometimes in higher quantities and sometimes in lower quantities. So there's this bit of this way that goes up and down and up and down. Without understanding the emotion itself and with only considering it through the lens of the conditioning and what we believe about the appropriateness, if you will, of emotion, we're led to draw some conclusions, as I said, that it's either wrong to experience those emotions; that it's not socially okay; or that there's something wrong with us. And what we miss out on is that this life experience that we have is simply a human experience that does include emotion.

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Emotion is intentional. It's part of our human makeup. It's going to be there. And where we get into trouble is when we try to change it from what it actually is. When we try to make it fit into those appropriate categories and we try to control it through the lens of appropriateness and frequency. So if we do that, what happens is that we don't actually allow any of it.

There are three main ways that we humans tend to try to manage the emotion or react to it perhaps is another way to look at it.

Number one, we judge it. So we judge emotion all the way around. We judge emotions in others, but more so we judge emotion in ourselves. We draw those conclusions that if I were better or if I were worthy or if I were like somebody else then I wouldn't feel the way that I do, which completely takes away the ability for us to even recognize that the other humans are feeling things as well. Instead, we just evaluate humans by the way that they interact with us. We judge ourselves against perhaps people that we look up to and the successes that they've had in their lives. And we conclude with absolutely no evidence that those people aren't experiencing emotion like we are. So we judge ourselves harshly against the emotion that we feel and we conclude that we're not good enough; that if we were better we wouldn't feel this way, and all of that judgment really has a negative impact on us because it decreases our self-confidence. It's very difficult to increase self-confidence if we're unwilling to actually experience the way that we feel.

Number two, what we do when it comes to emotions is we avoid them. So we try to get away from feeling it altogether and this is where that control freak and perfectionistic nature comes in. This is drawn back to the conclusion that if humans behaved themselves then we wouldn't feel a certain way. If clients were nice to us then I wouldn't feel angry. If people agreed with my recommendations, then I wouldn't feel bad, or I wouldn't feel unworthy; I wouldn't feel like less than when it comes to my job. So with that, what's so interesting is that when we're trying to control all the things; when we're trying to make sure that the clients have a positive reaction to our interaction; when we're trying to make sure that we do everything perfect so that they could not possibly have something negative to say about us on social media or to our faces. So we try to do all of that and then they still behave however they want to because the humans are going to be the humans, and so therefore after that, then we feel a certain way - guilt, shame, self-loathing anger, judgment - we feel all that way, the conclusion that we draw, again it comes right back to not being good enough, and more so even in that situation, judging them harshly for them not being how we think they should be. So we try to control all the things so that they don't react a certain way and when that doesn't work out, we feel super frustrated. Makes perfect sense because frustration comes when there's a gap between expectation and reality. And we're expecting the people that we interact with - at work, at home, wherever - to interact with us in a particular way, when we are trying so hard to make sure we're doing it right, so that they act that way. So they receive our interaction in that way. So number two, what we're doing is we're trying to avoid it altogether by controlling the entire situation. If we control

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the entire situation, then nobody should have an emotional reaction and everybody should just behave themselves. Nobody should then encounter the unexpected emotions of another person and we think that's going to make us comfortable.

The third way that we deal with it is by covering it up; by replacing it. So we recognize that we feel stressed. We recognize that we feel angry, or we feel frustrated. We don't like that and so we try to cover it up. We cover it up with things like overeating, overdrinking. You guys have heard me talk about this a lot of times - Starbucks and ice cream and cookies - like my go-to to deal with, to cope with the emotions the way that I was feeling, and then in addition to that, things like shopping. So, you know, Amazon, watching mindless television, interacting with social media. So all of those kinds of things that we do. Our coping mechanisms are all designed to help us cover up the way that we actually feel underneath it. Now, what you recognize is that it doesn't work.

Another coping mechanism for many of us achievers in the veterinary field is actually overworking. Believing that if we just work harder and we work longer and we complete more tasks, that it will be less likely that we will have a negative consequence on the other side, and therefore we won't have to feel uncomfortable. It becomes very complex when you start to peel it apart and see all the things that we're doing really just to avoid or to cover up the negative emotion. Quite interesting.

The three things that we're doing so far to try to not feel bad, not feel emotion at all, and honestly, guys, it's not even always bad. It's simply the emotion - the up and down of the emotion that a lot of us just aren't comfortable with. We would just rather, it all just be kind of neutral.

So those three things that we're doing, we're judging our own emotions. So we're thinking if we were better, we wouldn't have this up and down of emotion. Number two, we're avoiding it by trying to control all the things. So doing everything perfect. Making sure everybody's happy. People-pleasing all that. And then we're covering it up when we aren't having success in those areas, by overeating, overdrinking, social media, television, shopping, all that overworking, all of those things. Now, here's the deal. It doesn't work very well and you guys already know this because there are actually negative consequences to us personally in all three of those areas.

The negative consequence of judging ourselves is that we actually like I already said, kill our self-confidence. Our self-confidence actually goes down as we judge ourselves for not being like everybody else or as we judge ourselves because we believe that we wouldn't feel a certain way if we were better.

The negative consequence of trying to avoid it is just increasing our own frustration. So when we try to control all the things, when we try to do everything perfectly and we still get a negative result, that just increases that gap between expectation and reality, and then the frustration that we feel

increases exponentially. That becomes super frustrating on top of it, right? Because you just keep trying harder and harder, harder, but you never feel any better. It seems like it's for nothing and honestly, it is because that's not how it works. And then the third one, when it comes to covering it all up, so all the things that we're doing to cover up the way that we feel as our coping mechanism, what are the negative consequences there? Well, overeating and overdrinking will definitely be going to have a negative health consequence. If we're using shopping as our outlet, we're going to have a financial consequence that we're probably not going to be happy with. When we're using things like social media and television, a couple of consequences is, there is the loss of time. So not using a time in a way that we actually want to use our time if we were actually considering it. But then also that does tend to make us feel worse because the crap that we're watching on television and social media isn't adding to our positive bottom line at all. It's actually dragging us down even further. So even though we're avoiding whatever the situation is that we may have experienced in a given day, we're just adding on a new kind of uncomfortable emotion as a general rule.

These days in particular, when it comes to spending our time on social media and taking all those inputs from that and television. All of this and then we add the overworking, what is its negative consequence? Physical and mental exhaustion. Like all of this boils down to physical and mental exhaustion. We never give ourselves time to reset. We never give ourselves the opportunity to just experience it. So all of these efforts to try not to feel bad, actually lead to us feeling worse. And there's a much, much easier way to do this and that is if we would just allow ourselves to just feel the emotions.

One of the things that we can remember when we're thinking about these three different ways that we deal with emotion, right now, is to recognize that we're trying to deal with emotion through a belief that something outside of us caused it. And of course, we believe that because that's the conditioning; that's the way that we were raised; that's what most of us were taught - things like manners; things like, "Don't say that. You might hurt their feelings!" - which is completely not how it works. And so if we're trying to alter things outside of us in order to protect the way that we feel, it's going to require a lot of effort and it's not going to result in the outcome that you want because that's not how we feel better. And you already know this. You keep trying and it's not getting better, right? What we don't realize is that emotion is the second part of a three-part sequence Think-Feel-Act.

The Think-Feel-Act cycle is always in play. So the way that we feel emotionally is coming from what we're thinking about or what we're believing about any particular situation. If we don't keep that in mind and we continue to try to feel better by controlling external means, then that is where that mental and physical exhaustion just increases and increases and increases.

What's so useful about the Think-Feel-Act cycle is that for those of us who are very scientific, with pretty much all of you guys watching this, who want to understand how and why, it gives us that framework. So instead of us drawing our own conclusions on the how and the why, which is, "I feel this way because so-and-so said this to me in an exam room, or because this patient responded in a particular way to treatment", instead of giving that, the authority to create the way that you feel, you could actually start to investigate it and put the scientific method into play and start to recognize the Think-Feel-Act patterns that you have that are creating your emotional experience in any given moment. That allows the things outside of you just to be that factual framework of your life; just to be the components of situations without allowing those things to create emotion because they actually don't.

So if we can just get analytical about it and just consider Think-Feel-Act relationships - thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions - we can start to understand a lot of our own human experience. And I think for us being very scientifically minded, I think that's helpful.

Understanding is the first solution. The second solution is simply allowing. Just like anything in the world. When you step into an uncertain situation, you feel a little nervous. You feel a little scared. And if any of you guys are introvert, like I am, anytime you walk into a new situation, that's very amplified because if you don't know what's going to happen in a new situation, as an introvert, like that, just seems life-threatening. In my lower primitive brain, just like yours, is obviously triggering those fight or flight kind of responses. Totally normal kind of thing that it does. Not useful, not necessary in this time in our lives, but still does it. It's okay. It does it.

If we can just start to allow those uncomfortable emotions, then they become more familiar. When they become more familiar then they lose their impact because we stopped trying to avoid them by doing those things like judging, avoiding, and covering them up. So if we can let them become familiar and we can dig scientifically and understand them, then what happens is we can allow the Think-Feel-Act cycle associated with those negative emotions, we can allow that to be there, but we can also start to recognize that we can experience a negative, uncomfortable emotion. We can realize at the moment that it is because of something that we're believing, and we can then tap into our ability to consider an alternative perspective to intentionally think something different, which will create on purpose, a different emotion, and then we can let that emotion drive what we do next. We can let that emotion determine how we behave.

So we don't have to override the Think-Feel-Act cycle that's resulting in fear or nervousness or anxiety or stress. We don't have to override that in order to engage in an alternative that we can really utilize to move us forward toward what we want. And I think that, as scientific minds, we're always trying to solve things, right? Especially in the medical profession, where we trying to solve for the negative. We want the uncomfortable to go away. We think there's a magic way that we can do

that, and we've kind of found a magic way. Like those external things - overeating, overdrinking, shopping, Facebook, all that. For me, it does work for a while. You get a nice little dopamine hit. You absolutely feel better but we also recognize that it doesn't last long term and the consequences of those things are ultimately negative for us and our entire life situation. So if we recognize that, then perhaps we can start to just wiggle around the idea that solving for the negative emotion isn't the purpose, isn't the point of this. That may be just recognizing it, understanding it, and allowing it.

Just two simple things - understand it; really get to know your own Think-Feel-Act cycles and how you have patterns; and then allow, instead of engaging those old patterns. When you feel the emotion, just let it be there and then engage a different intentional Think-Feel-Act cycle that's more useful. That is actually a much better way to live this life because human experience is going to have those emotions.

Emotions go up and down, up and down. They're going to be in waves - sometimes the emotions are going to be so high, either positive or negative; and sometimes are going to be so low, positive or negative. We can look at it as like the highs are the positives and the lows are the negative, and it's like this ongoing wave. At anyway point, your wave might be moving very fast, very fast, very fast, which is absolutely my experience when I was in burnout in veterinary practice. I could be at the highest high to the lowest low, and I could snap in a second. I could literally be like sailing high - having a great day- and then I'd find out somebody was late for an appointment and I was instantly angry - lowest lows. That cycle was very fast and then other times it would slow down. And when it was at the low, I thought I needed to fix something outside of me not to feel that way. And when I was at the high, I thought maybe if I could just maintain everything that's happening around me, I could stay here. And what I learned is I couldn't. That no matter what I did, I mean, you guys have probably recognized this as well, no matter what I did and what you do, the highs are still going to come and the lows are still going to come.

Our purpose, our challenge is not to stop the cycle. It is to learn to ride the wave of emotion and to recognize it's just part of our human experience. That it is completely fine. If sometimes we're really, really happy and sometimes we're really, really frustrated or sad or angry, that's all fine. And in between there, as we start to understand why it's happening, recognizing those Think-Feel-Act cycles of our own patterns, and we start to allow when the negative comes up, then it becomes more familiar. Then it loses its power to control our behaviors, and as we kind of tap into that, in our ability to determine for ourselves our own Think-Feel-Act cycles, and engage the ones that are useful in creating what actually it is that we want for our lives, then everything starts to shift. If we have one piece without the other, if we have the allowance of the emotion without the understanding of it, or we have the understanding of it without the allowance, we will continue to kind of walk through mud. It will be better than the alternative of not engaging either one of our abilities here. So that will be better, engaging one or the other, will be better for us than continuing to try to handle emotions

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through judging ourselves, avoiding it altogether, or covering it up. It will be better than that, but it will only be limited to progress. We need both components of that. Think-Feel-Act. The way that we feel is created by what we're thinking or believing about any situation, any factual framework within our lives. We have thoughts and beliefs about that, that creates the way that we feel emotionally that drives our behaviors, the decisions that we make, the things that we do, and that's what creates our life outcomes. If we're unhappy with our current life outcome, we don't necessarily have to start with changing the factual framework.

Now, sometimes it's very useful to do that, but let's understand why we're trying to change it. Let's make sure that we're not changing it because we believe the factual framework is creating the result. It never is. Inside there are your own patterns. Once you get to know your own patterns and just allow yourself to be a human and live a human experience, you don't need to judge the patterns. As you learn your own patterns, then you start to see the opportunities to adjust so that you could actually generate on purpose the emotion that's more useful while just allowing the uncomfortable negative one to just ride along. It doesn't have to be solved for you to reap the benefits of engaging the positive alternative.

Alright friends, I'm going to leave you with that and I'll see you next time.

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We can change what's possible in Vet Med together.