

Episode 59 | Changing Sh*tty Client Behavior

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT



for Veterinary
Professionals

with **Dr. Cari Wise**
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How can you change the worst of the worst client behavior? That's what we're talking about in Episode 59.

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 59. Today, we're going to talk about changing shitty client behavior.

I was reading just this morning, scrolling through my Facebook feed, and another article came up about client behavior exhaustion in the veterinary field. Just complete overwhelm, being at the end of our rope, and all the things that you're experiencing. At the top of that, as far as causes, is client behavior. So the top contributing factor to the extreme exhaustion and burnout and overwhelm that veterinary practitioners are experiencing right now is this client behavior. It's this aggression, this cursing. I was astonished in a sad way because I wasn't surprised, but I was astonished again at just how frequent it is that veterinary professionals encounter people who are just outwardly aggressive - cursing, yelling, demanding being bullies (I talked about that a few weeks ago). So what do we do about this? Because it's a compounding effect.

Here we are in this very unprecedented time, a year into the pandemic, a little over a year. We know that a lot of people got pets. They didn't have pets before. So the pet population has increased exponentially in just a very few short months. The number of veterinary hospitals available to serve those patients has not increased at the same rate in the last 12 months. The availability of the veterinarians who are out there even including the new graduates, there's just isn't enough veterinarians. There aren't enough veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants to fill all the jobs that are available at this point. There's a lot of reasons behind that.

One, we just need more. But the other is because individually we're making decisions that are leading us down paths of being part-time work or not going back to work at all. Especially when we have other factors that would have come into play like raising kids and homeschooling and things like that, that have happened because of the environment, the pandemic, and all of that. So there's a lot of different components that have added to what we're experiencing right now, but it doesn't change what we're experiencing.

What we are experiencing right now is an unprecedented demand for veterinary services, along with an unprecedented restriction in veterinary workers - veterinarians, veterinary technicians veterinary assistants, receptionists, like anybody in the veterinary health care team - and then add on top of

that, high demand, low work volume/worker volume, and then add on top of that, the clients whose personality has greatly shifted. Now, I'm not saying every client, but enough of them that day in and day out where perhaps before we would periodically run into the difficult client. You know, the one that was never satisfied, the one that was a real bully on the phone that was demanding that they get in, where periodically we would run into those in our practices and some practices more than others, for reasons that we're going to talk about here. But now it seems like the frequency of encountering that kind of behavior from clients is even greater. What's really interesting is to take a look at your best clients. The ones who were always your best clients and look at their behavior, because I think if you'll look at the behavior of your best clients - those are the ones who may have been with you for a while; those are the ones who call ahead to make their appointments, who show up on time for their appointments, who have historically interacted with you in a respectful way, have been appreciative of your services, who you've really felt like you've been able to build trust with that's the bottom line. Those are probably your best clients. They're the ones that you make recommendations they make decisions. They may follow your recommendations all the time. They may just decide to follow up part of the time. But if there is a conversation about what they don't want to do, they don't usually come at you and throw the money card at you. You know, right. They make their own choices. They own their own choices. You've been able to build a trusting relationship where you're in partnership with that pet owner, as opposed to working against that pet owner. Those are your top clients. What I want you to consider right now is the behavior of your top clients because what I think that you're going to find is that the behavior of your top clients hasn't changed. That they are still as lovely as they've always been. That they're still that trusting relationship there; that collaboration and that as you've had to adjust over this period of time, going to curbside, being closed for a while, and you've been trying to get back on board, some of us are opening back up and not doing curbside anymore, as all that has changed and just trying to navigate this whole new way of doing veterinary medicine, they've probably been able to extend to you a bit of compassion. So it's unlikely that the top tier of your clients are the ones that are now calling up and screaming and yelling and demanding and creating so much of the misery that we experience. I want to consider that because I think it's very important for us to remember that they exist because it's kind of the squeaky wheel that gets the oil, like the ones who bitch and complain the most are the ones that get the most of our focus.

What we start to then conclude is because we're having more and more of those types of client interactions, which are really uncomfortable and not fulfilling, right, and not the reason that we do this job. The reason that we're having more and more of those, it's changing our whole perspective to paint a picture and a belief system that veterinary medicine sucks. Now, the downside is there were a lot of us already there. Think of the veterinary medicine sucks. It's just not worth it. Right? You go to school, you get all this debt, you work really hard, and then you burn out and then you go to something else. So, or worse. A lot of us already had that kind of mental path once we got into veterinary medicine, if we were starting to experience the frustration. But now we add to it, this new component of this excess volume and excess aggression on the part of the clients. It's like a no-win

situation. I'm just going to be real honest with you. At this point, it looks like a no-win situation, but there is an opportunity here. That's what we're going to talk about today.

So how is it that we change shitty client behavior? You've heard me say a million times. You can't control the humans and that's still going to be true, friends. No matter what, we cannot control what other people do. If we are waiting around for the clients to behave better before we can find some peace and joy and balance in our jobs, again, we're going to be waiting forever because if you'll just look around, you'll notice that this bad behavior, this aggressive behavior, this demanding, this arguing, this highly emotional and threatening kind of behavior, that's happening that we experienced in veterinary hospitals, it's actually happening everywhere. It's happening in all kinds of service-based businesses. Unfortunately, this over-the-top human behavior, even though completely not desirable is something that you're never going to control. So you're never going to make them be different. So the key point with this is that if you believe that your path to happiness and balance and support and fulfillment in a veterinary career is dependent upon clients, like these behaving differently, you're going to be waiting forever and it does seem very hopeless. But there is another solution. It's a solution that we as a veterinary profession have done a really crummy job at instituting historically. We care about people. If I could go put us all into a group like a lump group and give us a bunch of characteristics, veterinary professionals, no matter what level of veterinary medicine you're in, we do care about people. And we really care about animals. We're willing to make personal sacrifices for the well-being of the patients under our care. We have always been willing to do that, but unfortunately, what we have done is we've been willing to sacrifice above and beyond what's healthy for us individually. This is a deep-seated problem within our profession. It's nobody's fault, really. It's just the evolution of the profession over time. Where it is today is vastly different than where it was 60 years ago. You guys know these things.

Veterinary medicine was primarily a male demographic as far as who veterinarians were. It was primarily farm-based production, animal-based. Then companion animals kind of came onto the scene. The demographic of veterinary care workers started to change and shift and we've seen that now, shift all the way the other way. Where, now, the majority of veterinary graduates are female, as opposed to male. I'm not saying one is better than the other, but oftentimes just the needs and the drivers and the desires are different based on how you fit into your household. I'm not saying this is like absolute black and white, but we can't argue that it has absolutely changed. Along with that, what's also changed is what we know what we've been able to learn and what we can now do in the veterinary profession. How we can help patients like our medical knowledge or medical skills. Our medical abilities have vastly changed over the last 60 years. As we have become, I don't want to say better, but more advanced than what we're able to do for these animals, no matter if they're production-animals, companion-animals, whatever, as that has increased what we are able to do, the other thing that increased with it is what the pet owners also want to be done. As we've gotten more specialized, as we've gotten more intricate on how we can really approach different disease

processes and manage them and give quality of life that requires more manpower, more time, more skill.

Also, we have clients who are demanding. So being able to kind of get through things very quickly is just not as possible today. I mean, just the way that we can treat diseases is so different. So the way that we would approach the case of a diabetic today, vastly different than maybe the way we would have approached it 50 or 60 years ago. We have so much, much more knowledge. We have more tests available. We have more treatment modalities available. As we have developed that, what's also happened, as I said, is that education of the client and the desire of the client. Where before, when it was more vastly production-based with some side companion-animals, it was less likely the client was going to want to pull out all the stuff to do everything possible to maintain a diabetic dog. But today we've got two completely different populations of people. We've got people who have companion animals instead of kids and they do have the financial resources. They want to do all that they can and so that just requires more of us. Now that doesn't have to make our job harder. But if we're trying to do more with the same foundation that we've always had, then we've already kind of run ourselves up against the wall because it's already pushing the limits. Then you add on what's happened in the last 12 months that doubling or more of pet ownership and the decrease in the available staffing, including veterinarians, it has just turned into a recipe for disaster.

We are very much at that breaking point right now. The way that we see it day in and day out, the most painful part of it, the highest indicator for us of this challenge is that shitty client behavior. It's the client that's just an asshole on the phone. Forgive my language today, but this is, I'm really tired of this happening. I know the solution isn't to make these people be different because these people are jerks everywhere they go. They're not just jerks at your hospital. If we don't recognize that; if we don't step back away from it and realize, "Hey, the way they're behaving in my facility with my staff, with me is not actually a reflection on me. This has to do with their own crap that they're going through and I will never know their whole story". If we don't stop and separate that what happens is because we're so compassionate and because we do care, we internalize it. So when clients behave badly, we think we should've done something differently. Even if we don't overtly think that it was our fault that they yelled at us. We still think we could have done this better. We could have done that better. We should have done this. We should have done that. If we would have, then they would not have yelled at us. See the difference there? We keep thinking that we can make enough adjustments on our part of this two-way conversation, this two-way relationship to make them behave differently and we just can't. This is where our opportunities come in.

Our opportunities really come in deciding for ourselves and by for ourselves, I mean, both individually as independent workers - veterinarians, veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants, receptionist, I don't care who you are - if you're working in the veterinary field, these are decisions you get to make for yourself. But then also in most importantly, as a hospital. So owners out there

listen up and I'm actually going to be doing probably a couple of weeks from now, maybe next week, somewhere in the next couple of weeks, I'm gonna be talking specifically to practice owners and your opportunities here, but we're going to talk about it a little bit right now.

The opportunities here are to decide in advance what it is you're willing to tolerate, and then to build up the courage to cut off the stuff that you're not. That's where the opportunity lies. We can create a culture of compassion and respect within our veterinary hospitals and individually if we can get really clear on the kind of behavior that we are willing to accept. There are a few different pieces to this. We can actually do this proactively. We can start communicating this desire to create a culture of compassion and respect within our veterinary hospitals. We can start to proactively communicate that message to our clients starting today. That goes a little, something like this. We let them know that we are creating a culture of compassion and respect within our veterinary hospitals. That it is our desire to provide great veterinary care for their patients, for their pets, and that this requires two-way communication and a relationship built on trust. If we can't communicate respectfully, this relationship is never going to work. That the way that we do business here is going to require a few things.

Number one, communication. We're going to do our best to keep you informed of what's going on with your pet. We're going to do our best to get you seen at the time that you were scheduled for. We're going to do our best to get you out of here in a timely fashion because we know this isn't the only thing that you have to do today. However, the other side of this is that we are a veterinary hospital, which means there are times when things happen that we can't control. There are times that animals have emergencies; that animals get hit by cars; that animals get in fights; that they're injured. When there are life-threatening situations. There are times that this happens to animals and in those times, sometimes they end up at our hospital, which requires us to triage. If we have two cases in front of us and one of them might die, which one do we see first? We're going to try to help the animal that might die. We hope that you would respect that. We hope that you would understand that. We hope that you would also know that if it were your pet, that was the one that was trying to die, that we would prioritize it over the one that was waiting for vaccinations or for a recheck of a skin condition or for another thing that's not life-threatening at the moment. So we will do our very best to communicate to you what's going on, but just know we are also always triaging because this is the nature of a veterinary hospital, and sometimes things are going to happen beyond our control. We're going to do our best to get back on track. But when we can't, know it's not personal, and we're not doing this to really put to inconvenience you, even though we do recognize that it is inconvenient for you.

The third thing that we need you to know, if we're going to build a trusting relationship and be able to help you with your patients is that we have a zero-tolerance policy for disrespect. So what that means is that we understand that you may be frustrated. We understand that sometimes things

change. We understand that you have other things to do in your day, but never is it ever going to be appropriate for you to yell at our staff, for you to yell at our doctors, for you to threaten us, for you to curse in our waiting room, or to scream at anybody or a receptionist on the phone. That's never going to be appropriate. We're never going to be able to help you if that's going to be the way that you want to communicate. So communication and triage and a zero-tolerance of bullying behavior, bad behavior, disrespect are what we are building here. We know you have a choice on where you receive your veterinary services, but we want you to know that we also have a choice on the clients that we see. If that is your nature, to push your way through, to get what you want, just know, that's never going to work here. That we may have given into that in the past, but we're not doing it anymore. From here forward, we require communication. We require respectful communication, and we want you to know that we are doing the best that we can. Sometimes things are going to happen, and we will do our best to communicate that to you. We will communicate it to you in a respectful way and our expectation is that you'll receive it in a respectful way. If you're not willing to do that then this is not the veterinary hospital for you. And we have to be willing to let them go. I know that all sounds a little scary because what stops us from doing this? What stops us from doing this is the fear of the backlash. We are afraid of how they're going to react if we say, "Hey, you're being disrespectful. You're cursing at our staff. We have a zero-tolerance policy for that kind of behavior here. We're going to ask you to go somewhere else for your veterinary care. What would you like us to send your records?" We're afraid to say that because of how they're going to behave and what they're going to do. So what are they going to do? Let's just look at this. What could they do? Well, they could scream more. If they do, if they scream more, if they refuse to leave your property, remember this is private property. You call the police. They don't need to be there. This behavior cannot be tolerated anymore. You call the police. What if they go to social media and they blast you? Well, you know what? If they blast you on social media for not getting their pet in, when you are dealing with an emergency and you ended up, they ended up in that situation where they're cursing at you, I have a couple of thoughts on this. Number one, don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. I mean, if a client is going to go out there and write a freaking book over how terrible you were, then don't be afraid to tell your side of the story. Now, I'm not an attorney. You know, you might want to check with them. I hate the fact that we live in such a litigious kind of society, but we do. So you might want to do that. But if they're being a jerk, then point that out. Like, if they're saying like, you didn't care about, they're making all these assumptions typically, right? You don't care about our pet. You wouldn't get us in and you can just, cause I doubt that's what happened, right? Like you didn't just decide, "Oh, I'm not going to see your pet today." Like, what happens is, "We'll get to your pet as soon as we can. We've had some other emergencies. We've had some things come up. We're sorry for the wait today, but we're going to do the best we can. We're going to get you in." Then they blow their top because they're not happy with how they're going to have to wait. And then they become aggressive and rude and started cursing. Then you've asked them to leave and then they go to social. Just realize that the story that they paint on social, which is you refuse to see their pet is not what happened there at all. So feel free to share your side of the story if you think you need to, or you

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want to. You don't have to. You can absolutely just be like, he's an idiot and let it go. Or she's an idiot and just let it go. Because most rational, logical, normal people are going to be able to see a ranting review like that for what it is.

Now, this comes back to, again, cultivating that top tier of your clients, the ones who understand; the one who top tight clients that you've built a lot of trust with, the exact same situation wouldn't have behaved that way. They absolutely wouldn't have behaved that way. So if they wouldn't have behaved that way, you also just want to remember that if they see the review, they're going to see through that because they get it for sure. So I don't think you have to be so afraid of the clients you'll lose from a review like that because odds are the clients you are going to lose from a review like that aren't the clients that you want in the first place. So we have to be willing to cut some of these people off if we're ever going to get that quality of life back. This means that we're going to get more picky about who we see. That's going to require us to build some courage because we're going to feel afraid. We're going to feel afraid that there's not going to be enough clients. Peer practice owner, I know that that can be a worry. What if there's not enough? What if people stop coming here? Just realize that our opportunity here is to work on our beliefs around money and clients and abundance. If we can do that, that will then, we can help develop our own courage. Then we can start making these decisions to cut off the ones that are actually bringing us down and making it more difficult for us to do our jobs. It is scary and it does require a lot of mindset work quite honestly, because otherwise what's happening, the reason that we have continued to allow these people to be clients, and the reason that we have continued to do this for years because this isn't a new problem, it just wasn't in the greatest volume of the jerks as we're seeing today, the reason that we have allowed this to continue has nothing to do with a number of jerks in the world. It has everything to do with our inability to say no to the jerks, of our own fears of backlash, of our own concerns around scarcity and the number of clients, and of how much money we bring in.

Guys, we get to make all these decisions for ourselves. You get to decide how many patients you want to see in a day. You get to decide how many support staff you want to hire. For everybody who's in the veterinary field, you get to decide where you want to work. So you get to make these decisions for yourself as well. We're seeing where people are starting to decide, "No, it's not worth it anymore." Quite frankly, it's not! In my opinion, it's not worth the practices where you're getting yelled at all day long by clients. The solution isn't to get the clients to stop yelling at you because you never will. The solution is to cut the clients off who behave that way and to cultivate relationships with the ones who don't. That's how you can do your job better. That's how you can get your peace back or how you can get your balance back or how you can start to get out of work on time or how you can start to build some, maybe a little bit of breathing room in your schedule for those things that truly are emergencies. But if we consistently continue to cater to the jerky clients who are demanding, who are argumentative, who are disrespectful, who are cursing at you, who are threatening at you, if you continue to try to serve those clients, all you teach them is that that behavior gets them what

they want. That's what we teach them over and over and over again. I get why it's scary to cut them off, but I promise you once you've cut off the first one, the second time, it's not so scary. You cut off the second one, the third time, it's not so scary. What happens in the community is you become known as the place that doesn't take crap from anybody. You might become known as the snooty place. That's fine. You might become known as the place where they're really strict about what time you arrive for your appointment so they ask you to reschedule and there are going to be people who feel offended about that. That's fine too. You do whatever you've got to do to control your environment and the variables that you can control.

One of those things that you can control is the clients that you see. You get to decide that. Somewhere along the way, I think we forgot. Somewhere along the way, I think that we believe that because we're veterinary professionals, that we are required to see every animal that needs help. That is absolutely not the case. Go back and read your practice act. It's very clear what you are required to and not to do. There are lots of things that you are not required to do that many of us start to believe just because an animal could use some medical assistance that we are required to provide it, and that's just not true. It's not true at all. So go back and look at that if you need to have some clarity around what you are required to do, but just realize once that animal is stable, you are no longer required to do anything with it. You can send them on their way. Now, many of us get caught up in the, "Oh my gosh! Where are they going to go? But there's nobody else. There's no place else for them to go." Not your problem! Not your problem. I know you're a compassionate person. I know you care about the animals. I get it, but not at the expense of your life. It's not worth it. Guys, it's not worth it. We have to change this. It's not going to just magically change. It's been kind of brewing and coming for a while.

Veterinary medicine has evolved over the years. What pet owners have demanded or have wanted for their animals has changed over the years. What we know from a medical perspective has changed over the years. This has been building and it just hit the tipping point over the last 12 to 14 months, as pet ownership shot up; as veterinary care workers decreased; as people are making different choices. We have to do something about this now. So this means you get to be selective. There has never been a better time for you to be more selective about the clientele that you serve. Serve a lower number of clientele at a higher level. You'll make as much money as you do now, if not more, and you'll have a much better quality of life. Get creative. If you can't seem to manage your schedule and it seems like it goes off the rails every day that you're open and you're exhausted. Yes, the revenue looks great because you're doing so much more, but it's not worth it to you. Then shut one day a week. Just say, "You know what? On Thursdays we're closed." If you really can't get a handle on it, then just close one day a week so you get to the breather. Or quit working on Saturdays. Get creative. Your brain is going to get all freaked out by this. It's going to think you're going to starve to death, but you're not. Promise me, you're not. There are enough veterinary hospitals out there who have done these things and survived and actually flourished and thrived and made more money.

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We've got lots of proof that this works just fine, but it takes us individually being brave enough to make these decisions for ourselves. So we've got to decide, how do we want to provide these services? We've forgotten that we get to decide that for ourselves. How do we want to do it? And we also, as part of that, we get to decide who we're going to serve, which means the worst of the worst clients - the ones who are aggressive, the ones who are disrespectful, the ones who do not at all comply when you set a boundary. You can set a boundary here, "I'm going to require that you speak to me respectfully. If you're unwilling to speak to me in a respectful tone, I'm going to ask you to leave and you're going to seek your veterinary services elsewhere." That's a boundary right there. The boundary has been set. And then if that client comes right back at you, disrespectful, cursing, you don't have to be mad that he didn't follow your request. You've already decided what you're going to do. "This conversation is over, Sir. Where would you like for me to send your records? We're done here." If he keeps blubbering, "We can call the police if you want, but please leave the premises. We're done." Do it. Stand up for yourself. You do a few of these and you're going to get your quality of life back. I promise you.

Alright, guys, I'm a little wound up on this one you can tell. I'm just so tired of it. I'm so tired of... I'm tired just like you guys. I'm tired of that kind of behavior. I'm tired of it being acceptable. I'm tired of people being afraid to stand up for themselves. I know that in this case that you have the power to stand up for yourself. That you can say no to serving clients like this. That you're not obligated to serve clients like this. If we can start saying no, we will start to shift the culture because right now, unfortunately, bad behavior has been winning. Every time and I want you to, if you don't hear anything else, I want you just to start to see this for yourself, every time you give in to that kind of behavior - if they're coming at you, they're frustrated, they're acting disrespectfully, they're demanding, they're threatening - every time that you give them an appointment, that you work them in, that you pull their animal just to get them done and get them out the door so there'll be gone, realize every time you do that, they win because you're teaching them that that kind of behavior gets them what they want. The consequence and the price of it: decreasing your quality of life, increasing your exhaustion, increasing your stress, decreasing the culture of your hospital, and killing the overall morale. All right, my friends, I'm going to leave it at that for this week. I'd love to know what you think. Take care. Be well, and I'll see you soon. Bye for now.

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