

Why Is the Suicide Rate for Veterinarians So High?



By: [Susan Bird](#) October 4, 2016

Many animal lovers dream of being a veterinarian. Taking care of animals and making them well again feels like the best job one could ever have. Why then do so many veterinarians contemplate suicide — or actually take their own lives?

Would you be shocked to learn that the suicide rate for veterinarians is double that of dentists and doctors, and up to [six times higher](#) than the general population? A survey of 10,000 actively practicing American veterinarians determined that [one in six](#) of them had at least thought about suicide.

“People have a misconception that being a vet is all about vaccinating puppies and kittens all day long,” Dr. Marie Holowaychuk, an emergency and critical care specialist, [told The Boston Globe](#). That’s not even close to accurate. Vets are in a business that takes a real emotional toll.

Nearly 7 percent of males and nearly 11 percent of female veterinarians reported “serious psychological distress,” [in the online survey](#). Despite this fact, veterinarians as a group seem unaware their profession boasts a particularly high rate of suicide. The problem seems to hit women even harder than men.

“Going forward in the field of veterinary medicine, there’s going to be a greater number of female veterinarians than there even is now, based on veterinary school enrollment,” Dr. Randall J. Nett, an epidemiology field officer for the Centers for Disease Control, [told the JAVMA News](#).

“Because females experience depression and suicidal thoughts more often than males, relatively speaking, you’ll likely have a higher proportion of veterinarians who are experiencing these risk factors for suicide, compared with other similar occupations,” he added.

You might recall reading about two high profile female veterinarian suicides — Dr. Shirley Koshi and Dr. Sophia Yin.

In February 2014, Dr. Koshi, 55, [took in a sick cat](#) someone found in a park. She made him well and adopted him. A woman claiming the cat was hers showed up weeks later. Her claim was based only on the fact that she’d been leaving food for the cat in the park. Nevertheless, the woman took Koshi to court. Protestors demonstrated outside Koshi’s office and assailed her online. The lawsuit helped drive business away from Koshi’s practice. Devastated, Koshi reportedly couldn’t take the abuse anymore and overdosed on pills.

Only months later, in September 2014, Dr. Yin, 48, a renowned expert on force-free, humane pet training methods, hanged herself. She was a well-respected veterinarian and animal behaviorist, consulting for animal shelters, zoos and the Animal Planet TV show. Dr. Yin’s work has even appeared [here on the Care2 website](#). However, she was apparently [despondent over business issues](#) that may have been taking up too much of the time she wanted to devote to her practice.

A combination of many factors can lead to veterinarian suicide. Chief among them are:

- **Personality** – Vets are achievers. Perhaps they are over-achievers. They work hard. Many of them do almost nothing but work.

- **Isolation** – Veterinarians often have few colleagues to talk with. When they have a bad day, there's no one to turn to. When they're not sure about a treatment plan, they have no colleague to bounce ideas off of. Such isolation is depressing.
- **Sadness** – Vets often see people who have too many animals to deal with, people who don't care enough about their pets, or people who think they are animal rescuers when really they are hoarders. Sometimes, there's little the vet can do about these situations, which brings on sadness and anger.
- **Stress** – People become veterinarians because they want to help animals. Typically, they don't especially want the worries of running a business, but that's exactly what a veterinary practice is. Add the stress of dealing with difficult clients and the pressure mounts.
- **Compassion Fatigue** – Like many caregivers, vets experience emotional exhaustion or "[compassion fatigue](#)," which is secondary traumatic stress caused by extreme tension and preoccupation with their patients' suffering.
- **Student Debt** – Veterinary schooling can be longer and more expensive than your family physician's medical school training. Vets earn [less than a third](#) of what doctors and dentists take in. That combination means a huge student debt load and no easy way to pay it down.
- **Frequency of Patient Deaths** – Veterinarians lose many more patients during their years of practice than doctors who treat humans do. It's a constant source of sadness and stress. They also have to euthanize pets for clients who can't afford or can't be bothered with treating sick pets who could be easily saved. Each death weighs heavily on a vet's emotions.
- **Attitude Towards Euthanasia** – The frequency of euthanizing animals to save them from further pain and suffering can serve to make the idea of such a death seem more welcome and familiar.
- **Access to Euthanasia Drugs** – Veterinarians have easy access to the type of drugs needed to carry out an effective suicide, if they so choose. They also know how much to administer to ensure the job gets done.

How can veterinarians avoid crashing and burning?

"Too many veterinarians have no personal interests," Dr. Jim Wilson, a law-trained veterinarian, [told DVM360](#). "They volunteer at the animal shelter. They work. Some have no way of getting away from the intense pressure of animal care. You've got to get outside of the profession and find a way to let your brain slow down, quiet down, be distracted."

The vets who manage well are those who find ways to relieve all that stress. They run, practice yoga, meditate, lift weights, take up photography, become expert cooks, join the community theater. They focus on other things for a while on a regular basis. They also reach out to others in their profession for help. Groups like [Not One More Vet](#) offer online resources for veterinarians to discuss these problems with their peers in a safe atmosphere.

What's the moral of this story? Your veterinarian works hard, long hours. Every week is hard because he or she has probably had to put down two or three animals along the way. Your vet probably carries a lot of school debt, too, and may not do much other than work and sleep.

If you care about your vet, be a friend. Don't be a difficult client. Don't expect free treatment. Most especially, don't be a jerk. Your veterinarian got into this business for the love of animals. You probably have that in common. Show some caring and compassion for your vet, just as your vet shows caring and compassion for your furry friends. Your heartfelt thanks might come at just the right moment. You never know.