President’s Message
Dr. Timothy Lee

Are you ever at a loss to explain to someone what the Human-Animal Bond is? For me, it is being greatly attached to a puppy that just chewed a hole in the rug, one that knows better than to urinate in the house but just can’t help it when he is excited. If not for the bond, would we understand bad behavior and know that with time and training it will only be a memory of his puppyhood? It is the bond that brings tears to my eyes when my 15 year old dog has oral cancer and has to be told goodbye. I have been in clinical practice 50 years and it still hurts when we lose a patient knowing that a family is hurting. We know the emotional tie we and our clients have to their animals. Why else would we be in this profession? We know the bond. This association is here to let others understand the bond and how to make it a part of their practice.

We at the association are pleased to be able to arrange a tract again this year at the NAVC and the AVMA conventions. Our speakers continue to be those persons who are outstanding in their field of veterinary medicine and in their support of the Human-Animal Bond. The topic for this year’s speakers is centered on the effect of the bond on caregivers. Ours is not a profession without emotional trauma, especially when we become very involved with our patients and their families. How to handle that bond in a way that does not impact our wellbeing will be a theme the profession this year. The Human-Animal bond is seen daily in practice. It is the reason veterinarians and their staffs continue to set high standards for their practice and are sometimes devastated when cases go badly. That emotional trauma can be wearing on the individual to the point that they leave the profession or worse. We highlight that subject with suggestions for managing this very real issue. We, as a profession and the greatest portion of the population, appreciate the positive effects of the bond. Giving it balance is critical.

On a lighter note, we continue to provide support for student Human-Animal Bond clubs in the veterinary schools. We want to establish relationships with more veterinary students at schools across the country. We can do so by establishing AAH-ABV chapters at the colleges and/or by collaborating with similar clubs already established at the school. There is no cost to be one of our student members and we provide some financial support for their meetings. Additionally, we have awarded our first scholarship this year and plan to continue that program thanks to our generous sponsors.

We want to expand our reach in the profession in general. Membership is $35.00 per annum and we value your participation in spreading the message about the Bond.

Tim
Can animal interaction help develop resiliency and recovery? by TAD COLES

Can animal interaction help develop resiliency and recovery?

Petting a dog or cat feels great after a hard day at work, doesn’t it? Helps you bounce back. Am I right? There’s a good reason for that. The human-animal bond may be one of the best prescriptions for what ails many animal health workers.

Veterinary professionals need a lot of resilience. The American Psychological Association website says resiliency is exemplified by adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. In a typical day of practice we may get exposed to each and every one of those more than once.

Remember Tubthumping by Chumbawamba?

“I get knocked down, but I get up again. You’re never gonna keep me down!” That’s the spirit! What if that’s not quite enough? The lyrics go on, “He drinks a whisky drink, he drinks a vodka drink, he drinks a lager drink…”

Sounds like the veterinary school lesson I was taught about how to deal with hard times. Buck up and soldier on!

That method has been taught since around 400 BC when Hippocrates established objectivity and stoicism, AKA clinical distance, as a central tenet of professional medicine. Not a new idea! The problem is that method is ineffective for many veterinarians and may exacerbate fear, shame and isolation.

Personally, I need a lot of resilience and recovery. The word “resilience” has Latin origins meaning to spring back or rebound. I also need “recovery” or restoration to health from sickness. I’ve had to bounce back and recover from substance use disorder (SUD), compassion fatigue (CF), and burnout (BO), among other things. In an effort to decrease the stigma associated with these conditions I’m going to tell you a little about my path.

When I was a boy I injured my dog when trying to train her not to dash out the gate. In my unskilful impatience I slammed the gate into her side. She yelped and limped. I felt awful, but her body language told me right away that she forgave me. By the next day she seemed fine.

Months later, when she developed a leiomyosarcoma in her spine, I asked the veterinarian why it happened.

“We really don’t know, but sometimes trauma can trigger cancer,” he said.

I told nobody, but I knew I had caused my dog’s disease. The decision to become a veterinarian followed soon thereafter, as did my experimentation with marijuana, LSD, and alcohol. Guilt drove my bus to veterinary school and private practice, but I did not deal with that guilt, much less acknowledge it, until my first few years of recovery from SUD.

The human animal bond is a powerful healing force, but it’s not all unicorns and bubbles. As with love of any kind, there will be negative emotions associated with the inevitable loss of the object of that love, especially if one makes a mistake and hastens that loss. We are human, so that means that we will all make mistakes no matter how hard we strive for perfection.

My childhood experience set me up for striving for perfection followed by suffering from shame. This dynamic duo, perfectionism and shame, sets the stage for CF and BO. I held myself to a high standard, was ashamed when I didn’t achieve goals, held others to high standards as well, and worked hard to get them to perform better. I was sometimes difficult to get along with as a practice manager and owner.

My recovery from SUD while a solo practitioner was not easy. I had a lot of help. After a few years of SUD recovery I found I needed to sell my practice. In my case, CF manifested most prominently when I euthanized pets with children present. I suffered memory lapses.

I had an odd feeling when I saw the client at the event when in front of the client. Apparently my brain protected me from the pain of remembering the event when in front of the client.

I learned not to ask such questions when I had that odd feeling upon seeing a client. I often recalled the euthanasia as I walked away from the client. Apparently my brain protected me from the pain of remembering the event when in front of the client.

I had dreams about pets and clients. I took cases home with me, sometimes in my head, other times literally. I was anxious, on edge, and jumped at unexpected noise. In addition to having CF, which is acute and associated with a particular client or pet. I also had BO from too much to do and not enough time. I neglected my family. When I was with family and friends I often did not pay attention to those in front of me, instead I worried. I was in a nearly constant sympathetic, fight-or-flight, state. I did not recover from CF while still a practice owner; instead I sold the practice.

I wonder if I knew then what I know now about CF and BO if I would have been able to stay in practice full time. Since selling I’ve done relief work, technical service veterinary work for industry, worked as a medical writer, and most recently I’ve been consulting and coaching about SUD, CF, and BO.

I don’t think that owning a dog or cat, petting it, caring for it, and receiving its love in return is the whole answer to developing resilience or recovery, but it sure helps. There is so much work involved in recovery. I had to establish a multitude of new routines to improve my physical and mental hygiene. But matching up the signs and symptoms of SUD, CF, and BO with the psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of the human-animal interaction (HAI) reveals some interesting observations, as described in a review paper by Beetz, et al.

Isolation is a feature of SUD, CF, and BO. We’ve all noted that HAI has a social catalyst effect. Best way to meet people? Take your dog for a walk in the park. According to studies cited by Beetz, et al. human smiles, sociability, helpfulness, responsiveness, and conversations occur more often when animals are present. And patients with SUD...
get along better with their therapist when an animal is present.

Have you had a friend or relative in the midst of the disease of SUD? If so you’ll know that one of the characteristics of folks with raging SUD is that they lie and do not trust others. Building trust is imperative. Students rate a psychotherapist who has a dog as more trustworthy. In fact, people in general are more trusting of others in the presence of a dog. Children in a classroom with a dog have more empathy.

Folks with SUD, CF, or BO are often depressed. Having a dog present reduces depression and improves people’s mood. Elderly caring for a canary have reduced depression and improves people’s mood.

Increased stress is a hallmark of BO and CF. Hence the rubber meets the road when we consider the anti-stress effects of HAI. There are decreases in cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine when a pet is present. HAI is associated with decreased blood pressure, heart rate, and reactivity to stressors. With HAI there is increased heart rate variability, which is characteristic of being in a more relaxed, parasympathetic-tone state. With HAI there is reduced fear and anxiety, and in stressful situations, calmness is increased.

I believe that contact with pets, my own and those of friends and clients, made my recovery easier than it would have been without and will strengthen my resilience as I move forward. My belief is as much experiential as it is intellectual. All I have to do is feel fur in my fingers, look into those eyes, and see them squint when I hit just the right spot to confirm the importance of the human-animal bond to my mental and physical health.

For the first few months I didn’t like the new puppy. Whenever I looked at Ernie I felt like I had betrayed Virgil. Again I felt sick inside, what have I done? Eventually that passed and Ernie became a big part of our family and a loyal friend to Virgil. Loyal right to the end. I guess one of the reasons we bond so intensely with our pets is that they are always there for us. Virgil was always there for me, often when I wasn’t there for myself. He loved me despite not loving myself and he showed me what unconditional love really is.

It was in fact during my 16 years with Virgil that I overcame drug dependency and my eating disorder and in his final months with me, I finally put aside alcohol. It was becoming clear that his purpose was to show me what was possible, and love me through it all. It was becoming clear that as his life was coming to an end, he had a mission to fulfill, one of leaving me better than when I met him.

What I’m most proud of is that when he was diagnosed with cancer at age 16 we spent his final months together mindfully. I was truly present with him in those months. Not resisting his diagnosis, wishing it were different but accepting it as it was and instead focusing my attention on just being with him. Holding him. Feeling his breath on my face. Looking into those big, beautiful sea of brown eyes and knowing in every cell of my body that the love we felt for each other would never die.

His presence in my life made me a much better person, able to love with an unconditional heart and become a person I am not only proud to be but was meant to be. And I have that little roly poly boy with the big, beautiful sea of brown eyes to thank for it. Thank you little boy.
Patrick Flynn, DVM

Dr. Flynn is a 1994 graduate of the Va-Md College of Veterinary Medicine. He was in small animal private practice for 13 years in small rural practices, emergency clinics and large multi-clinic urban practices. He has worked for Pfizer/Zoetis for 10 years as a field based technical services medical lead for the northern portion of Florida. He has also taught and trained extensively on veterinary communication topics at CSU and UT veterinary schools as well as in Canada.

He developed a strong interest in the Human Animal Bond several years ago, and has helped bring specific thoughts and ideas about the Bond to various groups in Zoetis as well as practitioners in the field. He is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Anthrozoology at Canisius College in Buffalo New York and is enjoying learning about all the things human and animal that he never got to learn about in veterinary school.

Kimberly Pope-Robinson, DVM, CCFP

Dr. Kimberly Pope-Robinson has served in the veterinary field for over 20 years. Upon graduating from UC Davis, she practiced in both the large and small animal sectors. In 2007 she transitioned from running a single veterinary practice to managing multiple hospitals for a large corporate practice. Finally leading her into the pharmaceutical sector as a Regional Strategic Veterinarian where she primarily worked with specialists and their teams. These experiences throughout her career have provided Dr. Pope with a unique exposure to understanding the stresses involved with maintaining a career in veterinary medicine. Finding that path to each individual’s authentic sustainable career has become her passion. She founded 1 Life Connected Consulting (1Lifecc) in 2015 and her vision in starting 1Lifecc was to help Connect Careers with Life’s Passion. She does this through one on one support, providing customized team support, and as a dynamic speaker to both small and large audiences.

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Cindy is a Certified Speaking Professional the highest earned designation in the National Speakers Association. Cindy is a Motivational Speaker Helping Teams and Leaders Soar Higher. Cindy is a Trainer, Author, Coach, and Facilitator. In addition, Cindy is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with training in Compassion Fatigue and Crisis Events. Her clinical areas of expertise are Workplace Disasters which includes suicides, loss of life on the job and after hours, hostage situations and responses to crisis events involving animals. Cindy is the Clinical Director for a County Critical Incident Response Team and is part of the Behavioral Health Response Team for Florida and Critical Incident Stress Debriefers. She has worked with the National Crisis Response Canine Teams to help in situations as the HAB can help us get people to heal even before our work begins.

Dr. Marty Becker, DVM

“America’s Veterinarian,” has spent his life working toward better health for pets and the people who love them. He is the founder of Fear FreeSM, an initiative to “take the ‘pet’ out of ‘petrified’” and get pets back for veterinary visits by promoting considerate approach and gentle control techniques used in calming environments.

Dr. Becker is an adjunct professor at his alma mater, the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, and also at the Colleges of Veterinary Medicine at both Colorado State University and the University of Missouri. Additionally, he has lectured at every veterinary school in the United States, and is on the advisory board of World Vets, an international veterinary and disaster relief programs to help animals.

He practices at North Idaho Animal Hospital because he loves veterinary medicine, pets and the people who care for them.

Note from the Editor-in-Chief

Laura Baltodano, DVM

You love being a medical professional. You are passionate about what you do, and you do it well. Your fellow practitioners do too. And yet, studies consistently show that veterinarians have a high rate of suicide — four times higher than other professions, according to USA Today. Dentists used to be the highest. Why? There are many factors, but the reality is that the challenges you face on a daily basis can take a huge toll on you mentally, emotionally, and physically — causing you to neglect yourself and fall prey to unhealthy habits. I know — because I’ve been there. As a veterinary practice owner, wife, and mom of four children, I know all about being busy, stressed, exhausted! When I began to make taking care of myself a priority, I experienced multiple benefits, including overall well-being, better stress management, better time management, and a more positive outlook on life.

Welcome to the FitDVM Movement — inspiring and empowering you to live a happier, more fulfilling life! As medical professionals, we are so passionate about what we DO, and we often lose sight of who we ARE. It’s time to take our health and wellness back, to prioritize ourselves! You are worth it, and you will feel so much better for it. All aspects of your life will benefit.

Click here to download the complete e-guide: http://www.laurabaltodano.com/healthier-happier-you-download
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