

U-ni-corn (noun):

1. A mythical animal typically represented as a horse with a single straight horn projecting from its forehead.
2. Something that is highly desirable but difficult to find or obtain.

“So if you could do it all over again, would you?”

This is one of the questions I most like to ask veterinarians - of all experience levels and in all job types.

Sometimes, the questionee will say yes. Resoundingly, absolutely yes. I love animals, I love practicing medicine, I love my job.

But just as often, the questionee will say no.

No, absolutely not. And a variety of reasons will be offered. My student loan debt is debilitating. The hours are exhausting. The clientele fickle. The emotional toll is burdensome; far more burdensome than something as simple as flat words can convey. All of the above. We all know the statistics: male veterinarians are 2.1 times more likely and female veterinarians a shocking 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population (and because it is never a bad idea to share, the Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number is **1-800-273-8255**).

As this information has become more widespread, the general public has just begun to grasp what we have always known: this career is TOUGH. Although being an animal lover and an animal healer are certainly not mutually exclusive, they are just as certainly not the same thing (indeed, I have never once heard a veterinarian say they regret this career because of the animals).

With this increased public awareness of our hardships comes an increased emphasis on veterinary wellness: on identifying and preventing compassion fatigue and moral distress. On healing the healers.

I cannot emphasize enough how needed and welcomed this awareness is - it can literally save lives. But stress will always be a part of this job. So, just as we learn and memorize “normals” in medicine to better help us diagnose the abnormal, we need to do the same for our own jobs and careers. How do we determine what stressors are normal and expected, to better help us diagnose and treat the stressors which are pathological? What factors transform a regular old job into a Magical Glowing Sparkling UNICORN Job?

In an attempt to answer this, I have outlined 8 factors which contribute to job satisfaction (and create a pleasing acronym to boot).

Feel free to peruse this list and identify: what is most important to me?

**U: You.**

What are you bringing to the table as a practitioner and as a human? Are you reliable, communicative, and practicing medicine to the best of your ability? Do you support your staff and connect with your clients and patients by practicing kindness and empathy? Are you accepting of imperfection in yourself and others?

**N: Nurturing Environment.**

Do you feel emotionally supported by your colleagues, employer, or employees? If you have personal hardships, are you given the compassion and tools to face them without work being an added hardship? If you are a parent, do you feel supported by your non-parent colleagues? If you are a non-parent, do you feel supported by your parent colleagues?

**I: Income.**

Are you being compensated appropriately, or are you as a business owner pulling a consistent profit? Are your benefits fair, accessible, and do they suit your needs? If payment plans are offered at your practice, are you financially penalized if owners are unable to pay? Do you need to work more than is comfortable to make ends meet? Is student loan debt a major factor in what job you choose?

**C: Continuing Education.**

Are you given the opportunity to take time off for continuing education lectures? Are you supported in pursuing continuing education which is of specific interest to YOU (regardless of whether or not it will immediately benefit the practice)? Are you given a reasonable allotment for continuing education? Does your practice encourage staying up to date on current medical trends?

**O: Objective Medicine.**

Are you able to practice (or at least offer) gold standard medicine? If cases fall outside the scope of what your hospital can manage and treat, do you have access to specialty hospitals and/or the ability to consult specialists? Does your level of staffing and timing of appointments (or length of workday) allow you to stay mentally sharp throughout the day?

**R: Relationship with clients/patients.**

Are you able to develop longterm meaningful relationships with clients? If the type of job you have prevents this (ie ER medicine, shelter medicine), are the short-term interactions meaningful? Are you given adequate time during appointments to focus on client education? Does your clientele (at least attempt to!) follow your medical advise? How are negative client interactions and reviews handled?

**N: Non-work happiness (also known as: work-life balance).**

Do you have enough days off to enjoy time with family, pets, friends, or to seek time alone? Are you allotted enough time to complete your records? Are you able to engage in your preferred self-care activities (exercise, reading, traveling, etc) without worrying about work - ie can you truly disconnect? Are you routinely expected to check emails, complete paperwork, or call owners with lab results on your days off? Can you log in to your computer system from home and if so - do you feel compelled to check it even when off work to follow up on your cases?

**S: Staffing.**

Are you staffed appropriately? Are you able to maximize efficiency and productivity through logical distribution of duties (ie maximizing the unique abilities and gifts of CSRs, CVTs, and DVMs so that unnecessary crossover of duties is minimized)? Do you enjoy working with your colleagues?

Different factors will of course carry different levels of importance for each individual. What factors drive YOU to stay in this field, and to stay happy in this field?

I personally place far more importance on N1 (Nurturing Environment) and N2 (Non-work happiness) than on I (Income) - with some pragmatism maintained of course, given the reality of student loan debts. Others may be perfectly happy with a high-paying job which is deficient in most of the other factors.

Importantly: *no job will realistically fulfill every factor.* Even a Magical Glowing Unicorn Job will have its stressors.

More importantly: *You (yes, you!) are a capable, talented, valuable veterinarian and human. Job satisfaction should be a reality for you.*

For so many of us, when we strip down veterinary medicine to its core - the healing of animals - we realize it is our calling, our dharma, our joy. That doesn't have to change. But that also doesn't mean that we should destroy ourselves in the pursuit of our calling. A job is simply that - a job. THAT can change. Advocate for yourself.

Advocate because (and it cannot be said enough):

*You are a capable, talented, worthwhile veterinarian and human.*

One might even call you ...

a unicorn.

