

Creating a Mentally Healthy Zoo & Exotic Animal Veterinary Workplace

The Four A's for a Mentally Healthy Workplace

- Awareness – Recognize stress, compassion fatigue, and trauma from challenging cases (e.g., neonatal loss, euthanasia of endangered species).
- Accommodations – Adjust schedules, rotations, or duties after high-stress events.
- Assistance – Provide access to peer support, mental health professionals, or debriefs after critical incidents.
- Access – Ensure staff know how and where to seek help both inside and outside the organization.

Why Zoo & Exotic Teams Are at Risk

- Long hours and rotating emergency coverage
- High-stress environment with unpredictable animal care events
- Public and media scrutiny of high-profile animals
- Ethical and emotional weight of conservation decisions
- Tight-knit teams → strong support but also pressure to 'hold it together'
- (Note: Lack of access to mental health resources is a barrier, not a cause.)

Building a Healthy Culture

- Trust – Confidence across veterinary, keeper, and leadership teams
- Open Communication – Space for candid discussions during high-stakes decisions
- Time for Quality Care – Staff have resources to do right by patients and conservation goals
- Support – Structured debriefs after crises, recognition of wins and efforts
- ■ Not culture: Mandatory training without meaningful support or follow-up



Workplace Culture Includes

- Accountability – Shared responsibility for animal care and team wellbeing
- Expression – Space to voice grief, concerns, and innovative ideas
- Communication – Transparent, cross-disciplinary collaboration

Quick Action Steps for Zoo/Exotics Teams

- Schedule debriefs after animal loss or major medical procedures
- Normalize mental health conversations in daily rounds or team meetings
- Rotate on-call and emergency duties to prevent chronic fatigue
- Celebrate conservation successes, births, and team efforts
- Connect with mental health professionals familiar with animal care trauma
- Leaders: model balance, acknowledge emotional load, and encourage openness

■ In zoo and exotic animal medicine, supporting the team's mental health is just as important as supporting the animals in our care.

NOMV RESOURCES

[CLEAR Blueprint](#) is a practice certification program by NOMV designed to foster mentally healthy work environments in the veterinary field. CLEAR@nomv.org

[Veterinary Mental Health Support \(VMHS\)](#) free psycho-educational support groups and individual sessions designed to support the veterinary professional. VMHS@nomv.org

[Lifeboat](#) is an anonymous, peer-to-peer, chat-based support platform for members of the veterinary community.

[Support & Emergency Grants](#) support our community with basic needs as they support the animals they care for.

NOMV's website provides access to resources and support for all veterinary professionals and their counterparts. Visit us at www.nomv.org