

Overcoming loneliness or feelings of isolation in your first job

You had a whale of a time at vet school, worked hard and couldn't wait to get on with being a vet. You got your first job and suddenly you're on your own. Jill Hubbard, a facilitator with the BVA's Young Vet Network, offers some advice

YOU worked hard at school to get amazing grades. At the same time, you did extraordinary things to show you are an exceptional person – gold Duke of Edinburgh, leading an expedition up Kilimanjaro, getting grade 8 clarinet. Having got a place at university, you had a shock on realising other people were just as clever, or possibly even more capable, than you. You had a whale of a time, partying and sharing with a gang of people, and you worked even harder for five years to cram your brain with enough information to overload a 10GB hard drive. You saw practice, where it all became blindingly obvious what the diagnosis was, and you were really ready to just get on with it.

You wait till qualifying before applying for a job, and start scanning the ads for what you think you want. The interview goes well and you are offered your first job as a vet – less money and more hours than you hoped, but there is a smart practice car, and it's not too far from your friend Jo, who works 45 minutes' drive away.



Suddenly the decisions are yours. It instantly becomes less and less clear what the diagnosis might be. Do you guess it is a pyo, or will 'everyone else' say it obviously needs an ACTH stimulation test? A client sounds annoyed at not seeing the boss, and your self-confidence starts to wobble. Jo seems to be on duty every time you try to meet up, and the practice manager is muttering about new graduates being slow.

Useful tips

It's a long time since I was a new graduate, but I remember it vividly. I have also asked a number of new/ish graduates if they could offer any thoughts on how to avoid the

loneliness and feelings of isolation of the first job. The first thing to remember is that you have worked hard and you know a lot, but that you still have a lot to learn. We go on learning all the time, and it is important not to be too hard on yourself. Don't expect to be able to do a perfect bitch spay four days after qualifying. Give yourself realistic expectations. Don't be disappointed that you are not perfect – very few people are.

Choose your first job carefully. Talk to other people working at the practice. Be realistic as to what you are going to cope with. The wilds of Scotland are beautiful, but if you are a shopaholic they may be the last place for you to live and work.

- If you are not sure of an answer, say you will get back to them (client, vet, whoever) and then make sure you do – don't feel pushed into answering too quickly.
- If you feel the practice is asking too much of your practical competences, ask for

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help. If need be, sound humble and ask if someone will show you.

- Ask advice on cases and don't be put off if someone sounds abrupt; keep on asking.
- Don't forget to use the nurses – they have seen a lot, know a lot and can often help the stumbling first steps of a 'baby vet'. Don't be too proud to accept their comments.
- Put the effort into staying in contact with your college friends – they are coping with the same problems. Yes, you may be tired at the end of a long, hard, frustrating, bewildering day, but if you can't see a friend, at least put time aside to phone and talk everything through with someone else at the same stage.
- Offer that help to others – be your own built-in support system. Often, just talking it through stops it feeling so bad (especially when you find your college mates have had something similar or even worse).
- If your family are supportive, use them. It may be nice when they go again, but if your mother, sister, uncle, offers to stay for a bit, use them to have a meal ready for you at the end of the day.
- Take opportunities – if someone asks you to join a group to go to the local pub quiz, you can always say no next time. You are

brave enough to cut open a living animal, so you can be brave enough to venture into the local pub.

- Invite your new work colleagues round for pasta or pizza. You may find that that scary head nurse is quite fun.
- Explore the area – it is always fun discovering a new place.
- Keep any thank you cards – then if you have a bad day, dig them out and re-read them. There are people who appreciate you.
- Look after yourself – however tired you are, eat properly (have tins of soup stocked up, the warmth helps when you have done a TB test in pouring rain). Have warm, dry clothes for when you have done a calving and are absolutely sodden.
- Get enough sleep and pace yourself to rest when you get the chance – there will be days when you can't.
- Best of all is to have something else to do – walking the dog is a start, but can be lonely. Go to language classes, or salsa dancing, play rugby, join a riding club. Volunteer to raise money for Oxfam, help out with the local agricultural show, or offer to help with the local Scouts or Guides. Even doing 'vet' things like volunteering to judge the local pet rabbit show,

or take a buzzard into the local primary school, help you join the local community and gives a sense of belonging.

- Use the professional resources available – the SPVS support scheme, VDS reunions, BVA Young Vet Network and recent graduate meetings, discussion forums, etc.
- If you happen to live near where you are brought up, loneliness is less likely to be a problem, but you still need to make the effort to find time for yourself.

Remind yourself why you wanted to be a vet

Everyone is different in how they tackle difficult or new situations: be self-aware and build in as much support and fun as you can manage.

At the end of the day, all of us have had to brave our first job. There is an argument that coping with it is character-forming and helps you become more resourceful. If you can, grit your teeth and cope, and give yourself credit for managing.

Turn it all into a positive process – learn as much as you can from each situation, and keep remembering why you wanted to be a vet in the first place. Being a vet could not be a more variable, interesting and challenging job, with enormous job satisfaction.