

Beyond Blue case study – Natasha Wilks

Growing up on a property in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, Natasha Wilks was always around animals.

“We had horses, cows, pigs and an array of birds. We lived at the end of a valley, so when the pigs would escape it was a great workout chasing them around the hills!” Natasha said.

“My mother would always rescue baby wallabies from the side of the road and we raised one for years until it was time for her to leave. She would sleep on the bed and beat up the dogs for their food.”

While growing up on their family’s small farm meant lots of fun adventures, it also had its hard times and a focus on ‘getting on with it’.

“I was bought up to be tough. Work hard, don’t ask for help as it’s a sign of weakness. Just keep going,” she said. In more recent times, Natasha has been chasing a different kind of animal around the Redlands in Brisbane’s bayside, a naughty golden retriever called Bailey.

Natasha says her dog’s behaviour can be quite embarrassing, considering she is the local veterinarian.

“Having a dog who doesn’t get a long very well with others has led to some awkward moments and sideways glances,” she said.

Natasha has been a veterinarian for 20 years and she coaches other veterinary staff to cope with the challenges of the profession and improve their wellbeing.

“There are so many things which weigh on our minds; the long hours, financial struggles, and the difficult situations veterinarians are placed in,” she said.

Natasha explained that even before veterinary students finish their degrees, stress can start taking a toll.

“During my final and seventh year of study, I was feeling exhausted and burnt out,” she said.

“I had spent the last seven years working every weekend and weeknight while still doing my veterinary degree, five days a week.

“It all came to a head when I had a rotation where we lived at the veterinary hospital to monitor all the patients overnight. I was very teary and didn’t want to do it. This was my turning point to seeking help.

“I spoke to a mentor at the veterinary hospital who had done research into the mental health issues of the students, he was really helpful and booked an appointment for me with the doctor at the university medical centre.

“For me to reach out and admit that I wasn’t coping was a massive step. I’d been brought up to soldier on and to deal with things myself. I realised I couldn’t keep doing it anymore. I was exhausted, depressed and I needed help.”

Natasha has experienced many ups and downs throughout her veterinary career in different working environments

“My first job in central Queensland was great, but incredibly stressful. I was working in a practice that was

very busy and I was thrown in the deep end. I started to get very stressed and exhausted again. Part way through my first year of work I went back on medication,” she said.

Natasha says things improved in 2003 when regulations changed in the veterinary industry and a 38-hour working week was introduced.

“Suddenly, I had half a day off every week. I was still working more than 38 hours, but it was nice to have time off to go the beach or the gym before work,” she said.

“Nowadays I recognise when I’m becoming exhausted and I’ve learned to slow down. For me, the signs are when I become more negative, frustrated and judgmental, less willing to spend time with friends and I let things get to me.

“My identity isn’t tied to my veterinary career anymore, so when I have challenges in practice I try not to take it personally and focus on the things I can control.”

Part of taking control for Natasha has been about finding what she loves and making time to enjoy them.

“Exercise is really important in helping me stay well. I don’t pound the pavement, but I walk with our old retriever who still has a lot of energy. I walk and smell the air, notice all the new flowers and listen to the birds,” she said.

“Making time for me is really important. I know that whatever life throws at me, I can deal with it. I have the skills and I’ve been through enough to know that I can cope.”

For more information about depression and anxiety, visit www.beyondblue.org.au To talk to a mental health professional, contact the 24/7 *beyondblue* Support Service on 1300 22 4636. Web chat is also available 3pm til midnight at beyondblue.org.au/getsupport