

# Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study

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# Background & Purpose

## Risk factors for suicide, attitudes toward mental illness, and practice-related stressors among US veterinarians

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**Objective**—To evaluate the prevalence of suicide risk factors, attitudes toward mental illness, and practice-related stressors among US veterinarians.  
**Design**—Cross-sectional survey.

Recent publications suggest that veterinarians have a high level of mental distress and elevated suicide rate



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# Background & Purpose

- High levels of student debt combined with modest incomes have created serious enough concerns that AVMA conducted a major symposium on solutions
- Numerous reports of compassion fatigue and burnout exist in the profession



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# Questions

- Is there a mental health crisis in the profession?
- If so, what is contributing to it?
- What can be done about it?



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# Goals



Definitively quantify the prevalence of mental illness and stress in the veterinary profession



Compare to previous studies and general US population



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# Research Team

Ulrich Schimmack, PhD, University of Toronto

- Psychologist and wellbeing expert



Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW, University of Tennessee CVM

- Licensed clinical social worker working in a veterinary setting



Linda Lord, DVM, PhD, Merck Animal Health (MAH)



Colin Siren, Kynetec Market Research



John Volk, Brakke Consulting



# Methodology

- ❖ AVMA:
  - 20,000 randomly selected email addresses
  - Email letter alerting sample to upcoming study
- ❖ Email invitation + 2 reminders
- ❖ Incentive: Drawing for 20 \$100 gift cards; contribution to AVMF
- ❖ Survey open Nov 2-16, 2017
- ❖ Average survey length 18.1 minutes.
- ❖ 3,540 usable, completed responses (17.7%)
- ❖ Data weighted based on age, gender and region of the US
- ❖ Margin of error +/- 1.62% at 95% confidence level



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# Two Key Measures

## 1. Serious psychological distress

- i.e., Mental Health
- Measured by standardized “Kessler 6” questions



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# Two Key Measures

## 2. Wellbeing

- Wellbeing examines the way individuals think and feel about their lives compared to the best/worst possible lives they can imagine.
- Measured and indexed using standardized questions
  - *How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*
  - *Suppose that the top of the ladder below represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. Where are you on the ladder?*
  - *Please indicate your agreement with the following statement: “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.”*



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# Key Findings



Mental illness among veterinarians similar to that found in the general population  
Many not receiving treatment



Overall, wellbeing is slightly lower than in the general population



Significant variation by segment of the profession



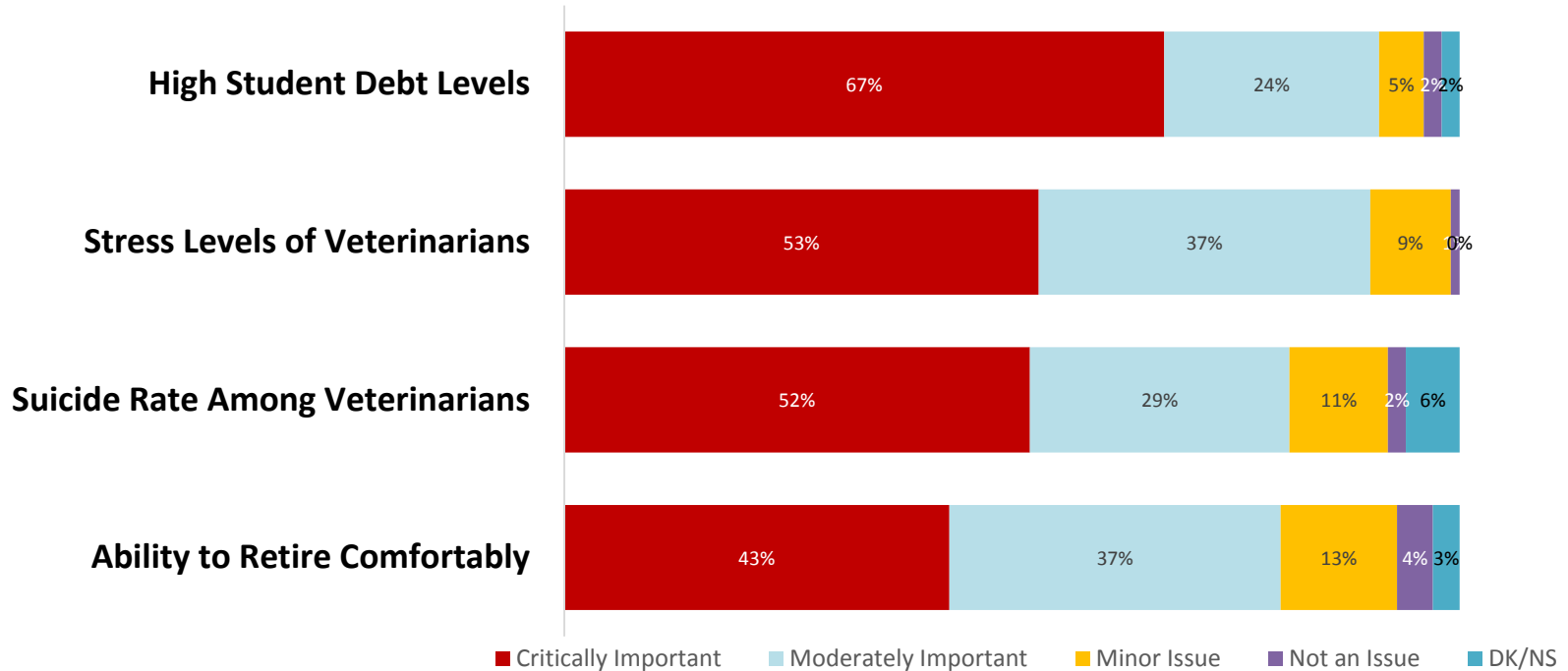
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# Debt, Stress, Suicide Top Concerns

Among 11 tested



Below are several issues you may or may not consider to be significant challenges faced by the veterinary profession today.

Base: All Respondents: n=3,540



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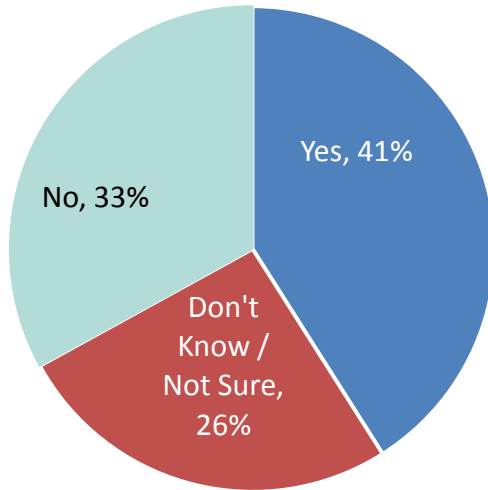


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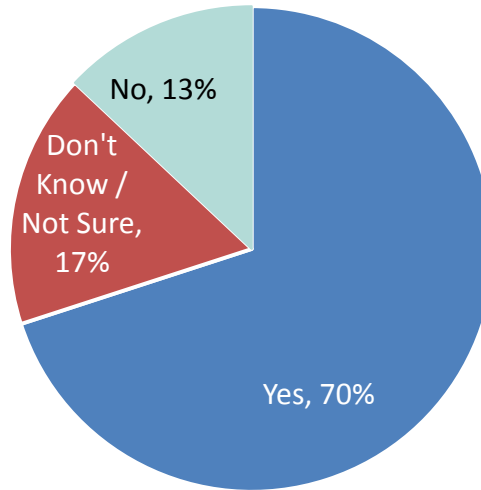
# Key Findings

## Only 41% of veterinarians recommend a career in veterinary medicine

Veterinarians

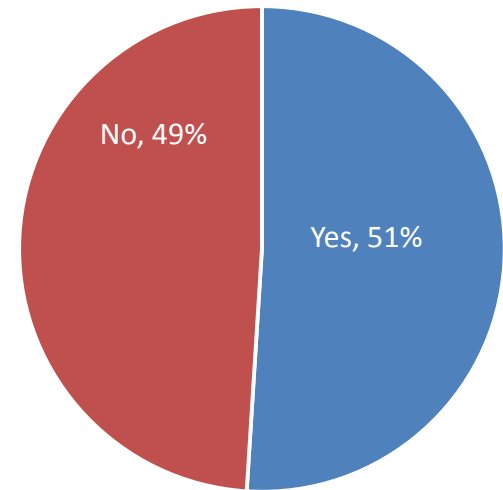


General Population



Source: Omnibus Study

Physicians - 2016



Source: Survey of America's Physicians, 2016

CLINIC 9a. Would you recommend a career in veterinary medicine to a friend or family member?

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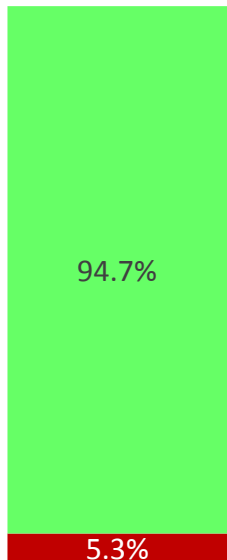


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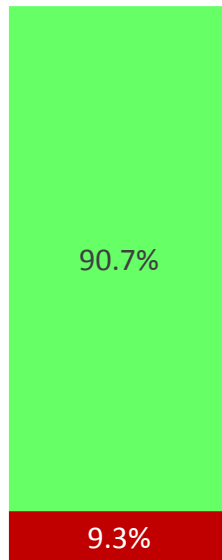
# Psychological Distress Consistent With US; Lower than Nett



Significantly lower than Nett Study. Difference between MAH and PSID study is not statistically significant.



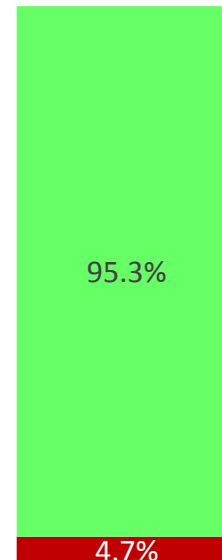
**U.S. Veterinarians  
MAH Wellbeing Study  
2017**  
n=3,539



Significantly higher than both MAH and PSID studies



**U.S. Veterinarians  
Nett Study  
2015**  
n=11,627



**Employed General Population  
PSID**  
n=6,284

■ Distressed ■ Not Distressed

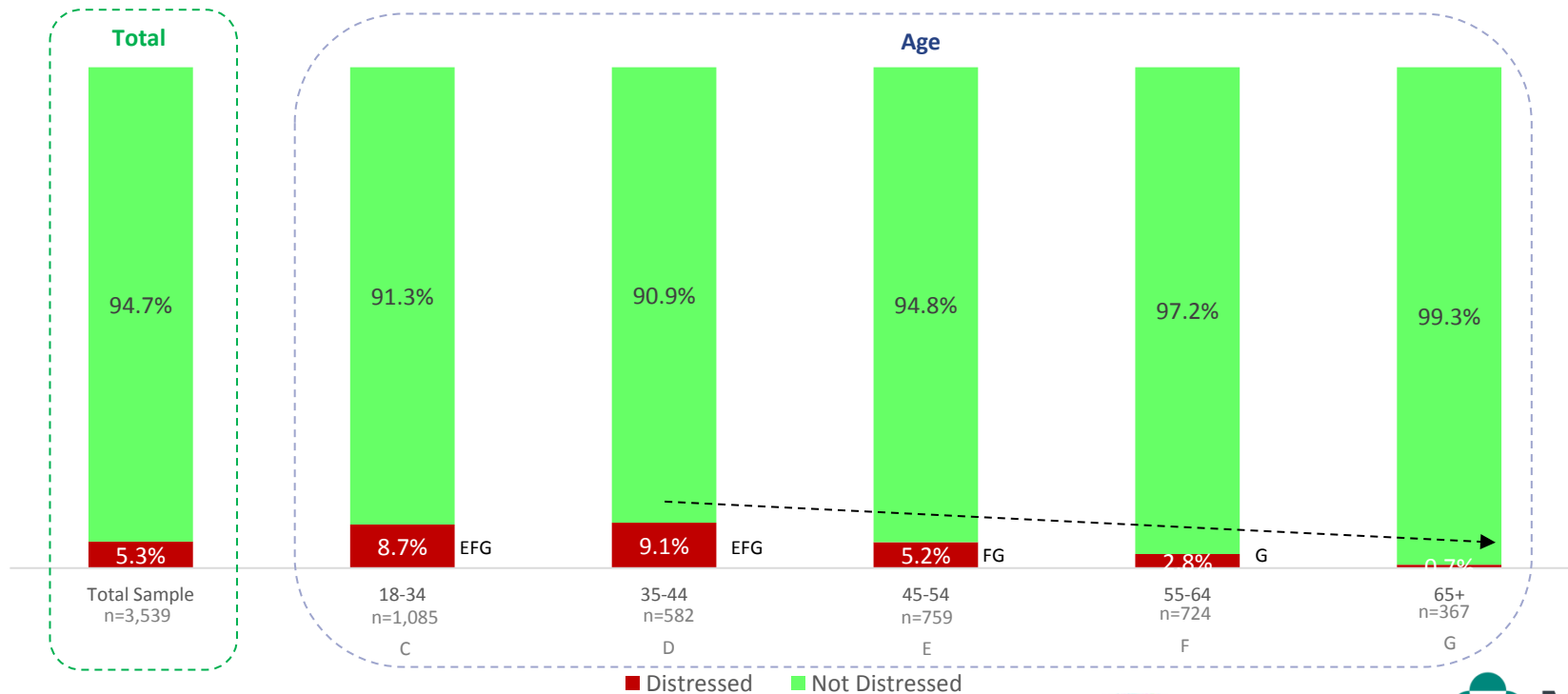


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# More Psychological Distress in Younger Vets

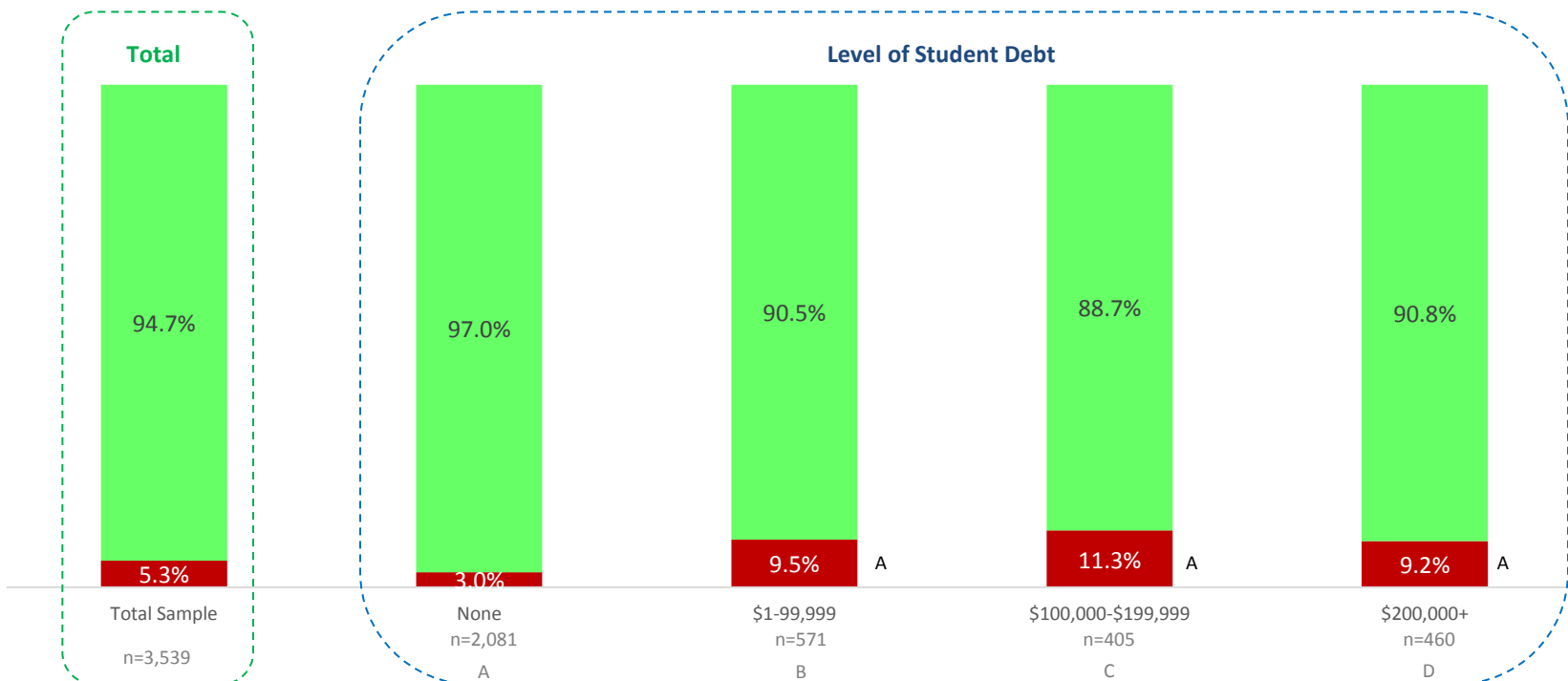


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# Student Debt a Driver of Psychological Distress



WB5. Results based on results of Kessler 6.

■ Distressed



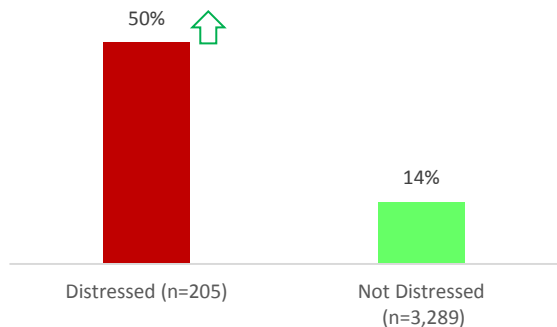
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# Only Half of those Distressed Receiving Treatment

## % Receiving Treatment or Medication for any Mental Health Condition



  Statistically Significant Difference

## Major self-reported conditions of those distressed:

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Depression                     | 94% |
| Compassion fatigue/<br>burnout | 88% |
| Anxiety, panic attacks         | 83% |

MH1. Are you now taking medicine or receiving treatment from a doctor or other health professional for any type of mental health condition or emotional problem?

MH11. Does your practice or company offer an Employee Assistance Program (a program that helps assist employees with personal problems).



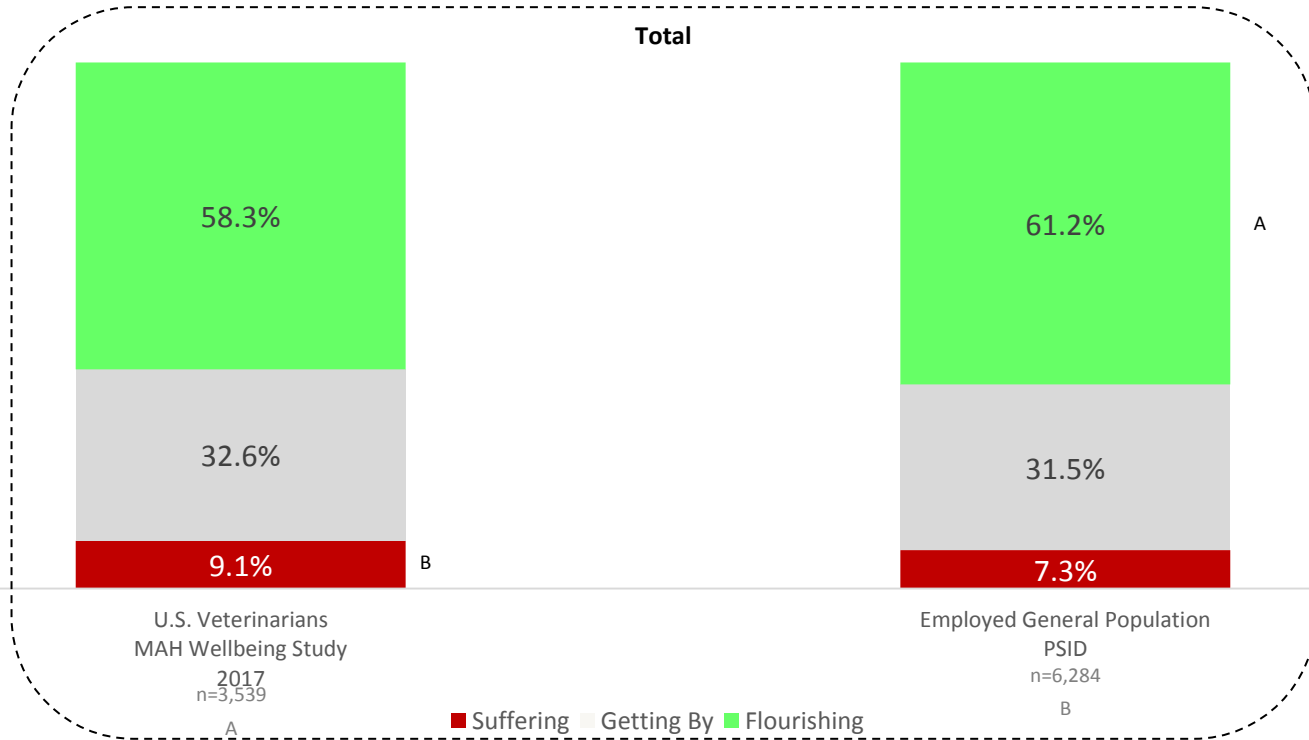
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# Veterinarian Wellbeing Slightly Lower Than General Population



Segmentation Using MAH Wellbeing Index

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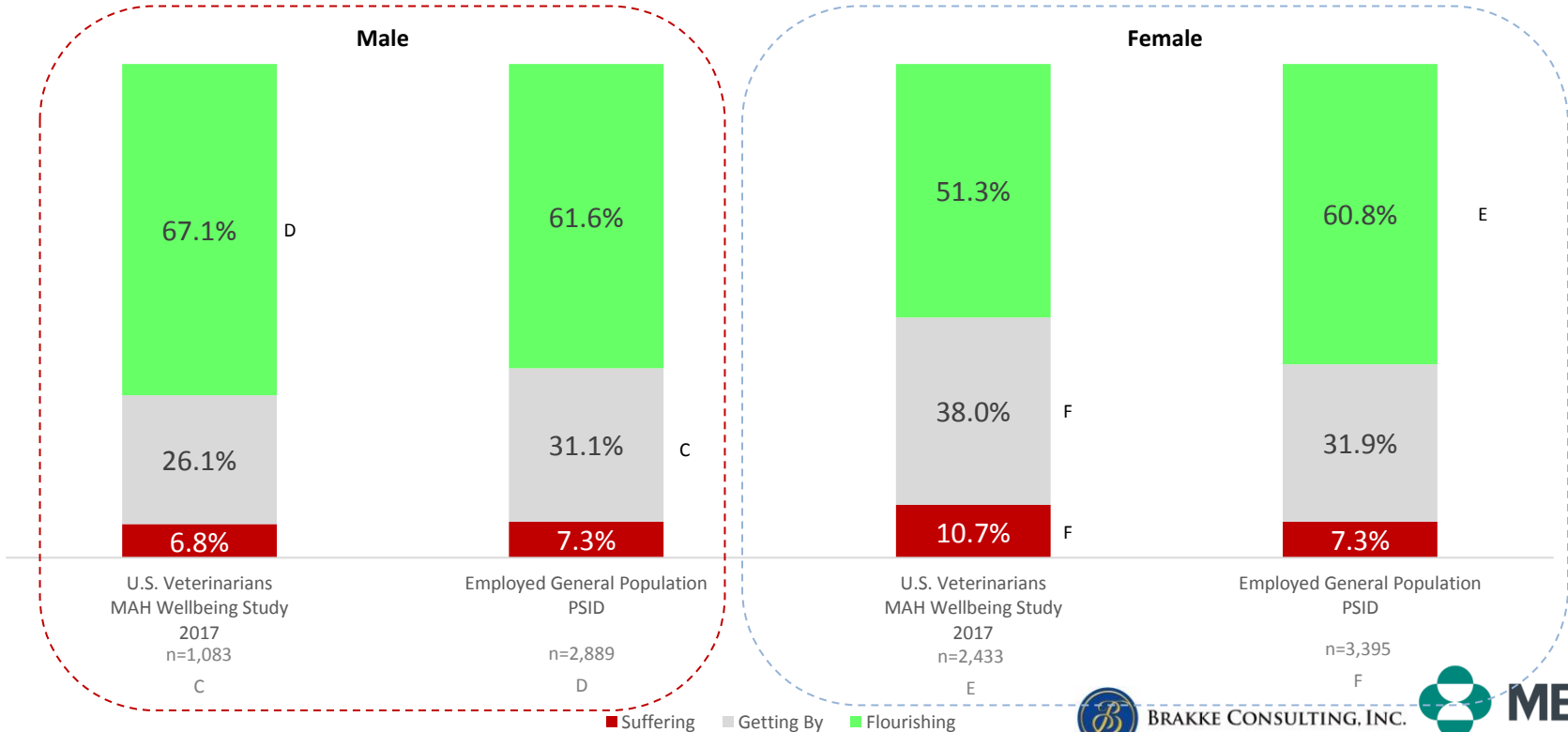


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# Men Veterinarians Higher, Women Lower Than General Population

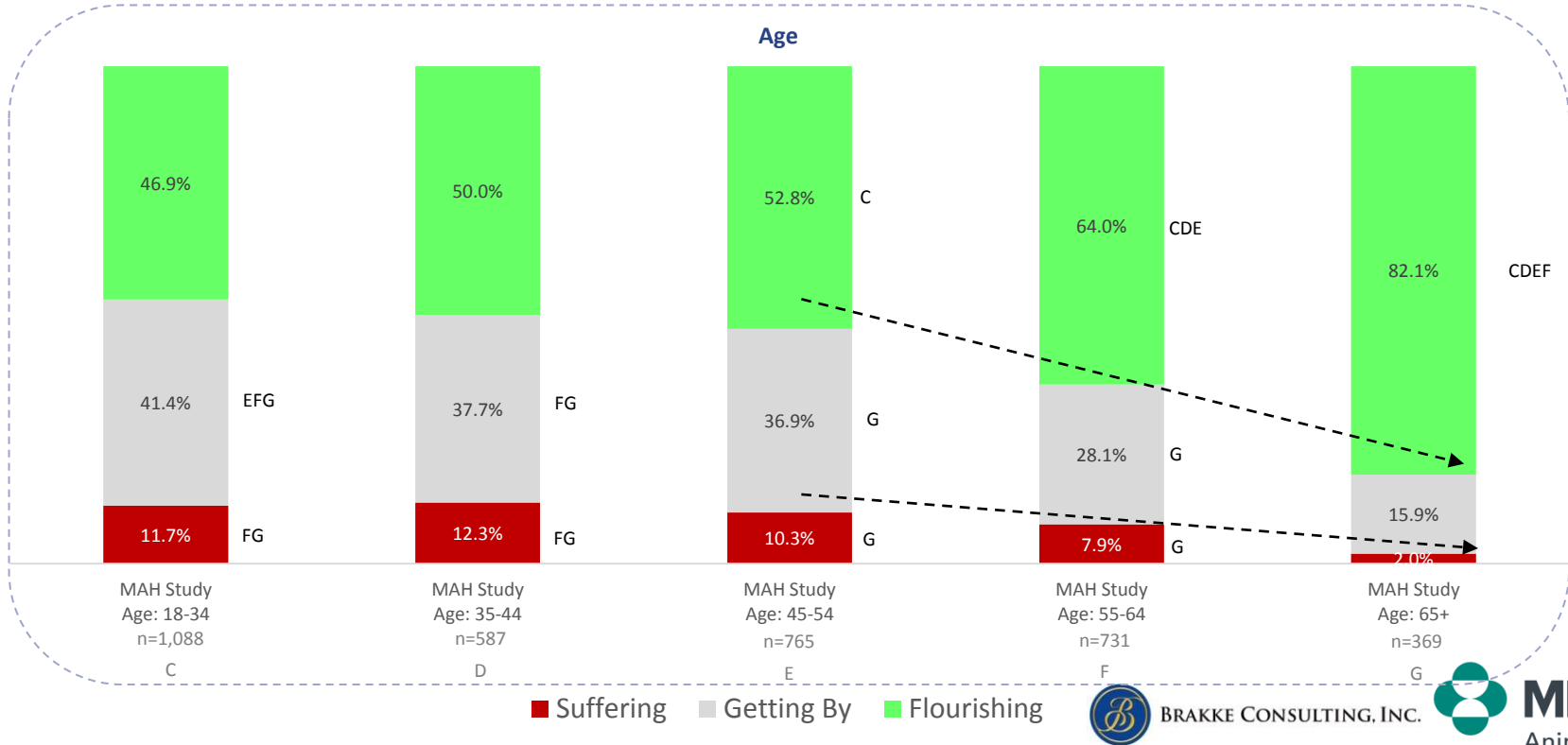


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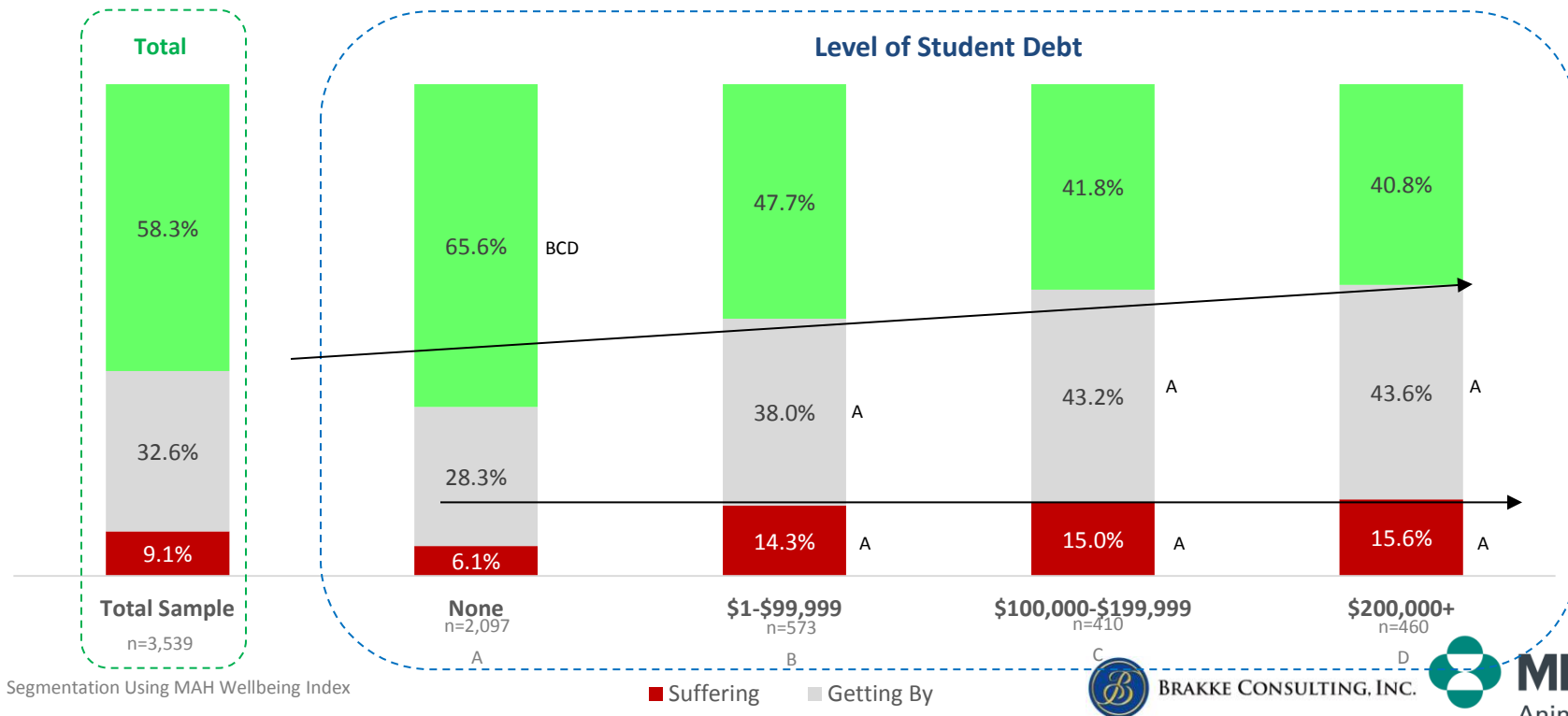


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# Wellbeing Varies Significantly by Age



# Student Debt Impacts Wellbeing, Regardless of Amount



# Conclusions

Veterinary Medicine is not in a state of crisis. About 1 in 20 veterinarians are suffering serious psychological distress, consistent with what is found in the general population.

There's a mental health treatment gap in veterinary medicine. While many veterinarians with serious psychological distress are getting treatment, a significant population is not. Few employers offer Employee Assistance Programs.



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# Recommendations

## Veterinary Organizations

- Evaluate, improve and more effectively publicize existing organizational wellness resources
- Continue to seek ways to reduce student debt and improve financial conditions in the profession, especially for young veterinarians.
- Educate constituents about signs, symptoms and rates of mental illness among veterinarians



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# Recommendations

## Employers

- Educate employees on the existence of mental health issues and provide time off for appointments with physicians and counselors
- Outwardly discuss and set healthy practice expectations for work/life balance
- Create mentoring programs for new employees to help them gain the skills and confidence need to perform satisfactorily in their career
- Consider partnering with in-practice veterinary social work professionals



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# Recommendations

## You

- ▶ With the help of a mental health professional or coach develop a stress management plan
- ▶ Retain a certified financial planner to develop a plan to manage finances and student debt
- ▶ Budget time for healthy activities such as family time, socializing with friends, recreation and exercise. Limit time on social media.



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