

Veterinary Mental Health and Wellbeing and How to Improve Them



Learnings from the Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study III

January 2022

Agenda



1 **KEY FINDINGS**

- About the Study
- Key Findings
- Issues Facing the Profession



2 **DETAILED FINDINGS**

- Wellbeing
- Mental Health
- Burnout
- Attitudes Towards Profession



3 **ACTION STEPS**

- What Veterinarians and Staff Can Do to Improve Wellbeing
- What Employers Can Do to Improve Wellbeing

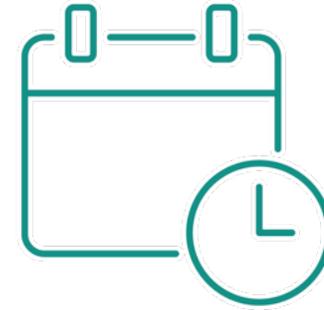


4 **CONCLUSIONS/
Q&A**

About the Study



Random Sample of
30K Veterinarians



Conducted
Sept-Oct 2021



2,495 veterinarians completed
surveys (8.4%)



448 veterinary staff
surveys completed (2021)

Margin of error at 95% confidence was +/- 1.94



Key Findings

Key Findings



- Shortage of veterinarians – and especially of staff – have joined stress, suicide and student debt as the most critical issues facing the profession.
- Wellbeing of veterinarians is consistent with that of non-veterinarians, although there are variations among veterinarians; staff wellbeing is lower
- The percentage of veterinarians with serious psychological distress has increased since 2019, due in large part directly or indirectly to the pandemic
 - Although mental distress increased, suicide ideation did not
- On average, a higher percentage of staff suffer from serious psychological distress than veterinarians
 - While suicide ideation was higher, planning and attempts were not
- Burnout remains a serious issue among both veterinarians and staff
- While veterinarian attitudes towards the profession remain lukewarm, there is no reason to expect a significant exodus in the near future
 - About 1/3 of staff members plan to leave their jobs in the 2 years

Key Findings



3 most important things veterinarians can do to maintain wellbeing and mental health:

- Have a healthy technique for dealing with stress
- Maintain an appropriate and healthy balance between work and non-work
- Engage a financial planner to manage debt and reduce stress



3 most important things employers can do:

- Foster a work climate that:
 - Has a strong sense of teamwork
 - Cultivates a high degree of trust
 - Encourages open communication
 - Provides sufficient time to provide high-quality care
- Acknowledge the existence of mental health and wellbeing issues in the profession and provide appropriate support
- Provide an Employee Assistance Program and health insurance that covers mental health treatment

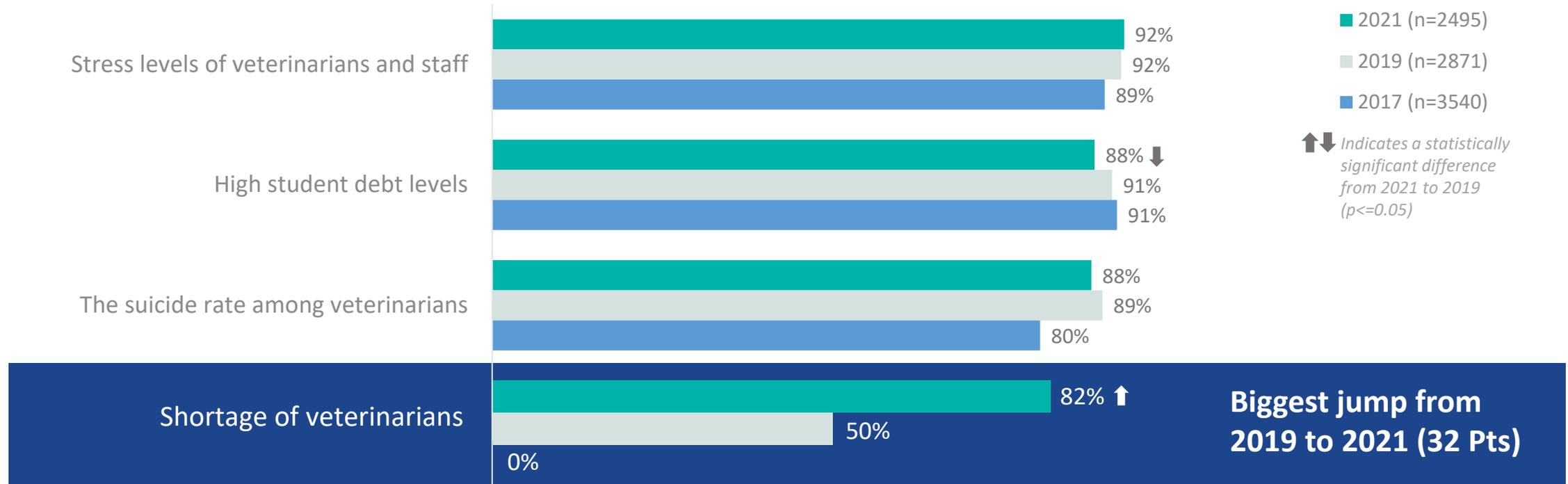


Detailed Findings



Stress and Student Debt Continue to be Leading Concerns for Veterinarians

- Concern over the shortage of veterinarians showed the largest increase from previous studies



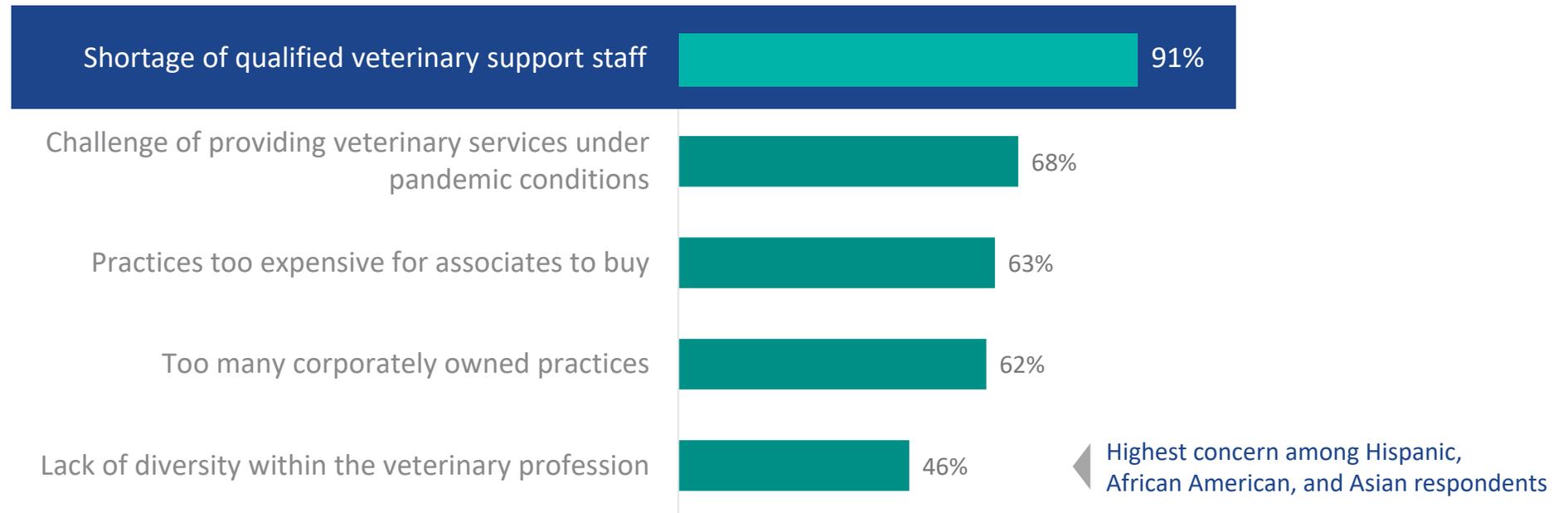
Reporting Top 2 Box for issues (Critically Important + Moderately Important)

ISSUE1. Listed below were several issues you may or may not consider to be significant challenges faced by the veterinary profession today. Please rate each issue using the scale below.

Base: All Respondents [2021 (n=2495); 2019 (n=2871); 2017 Responses (n=3540)]

Shortage of Qualified Veterinary Staff Was One of the Biggest Concerns of All

- Clearly, personnel issues are top of mind for veterinarians, staff too
- Lack of diversity was viewed as a significant issue among veterinarians of color



Reporting Top 2 Box for issues (Critically Important + Moderately Important)

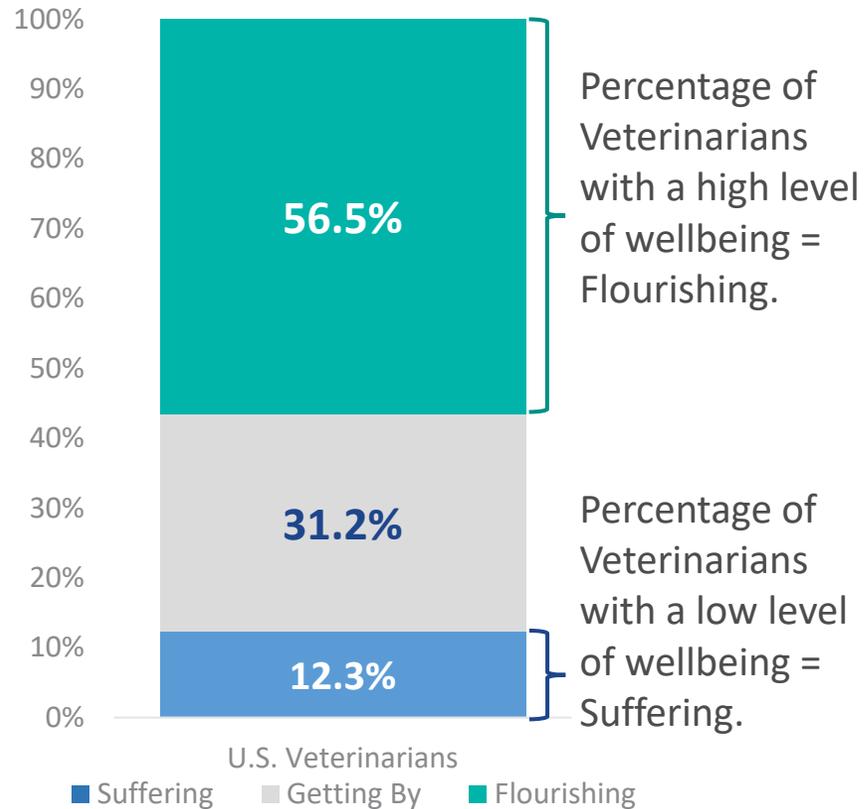
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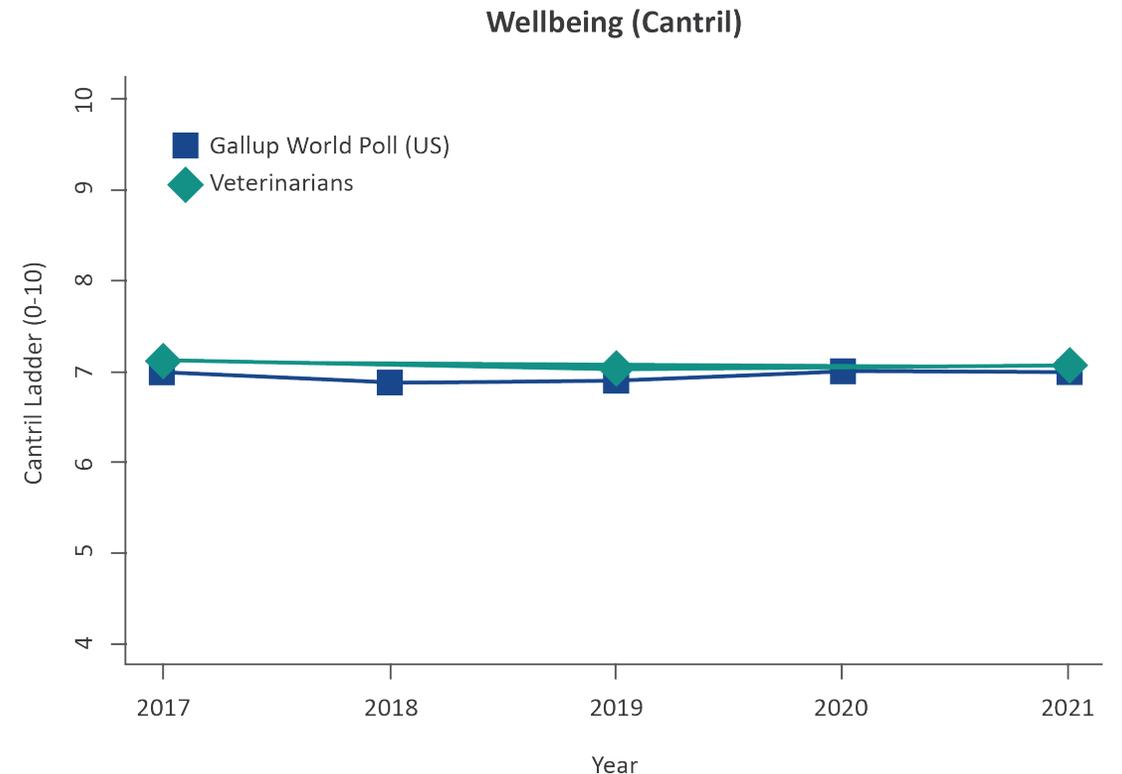


Wellbeing, Mental Health, Burnout

Wellbeing of Veterinarians Consistent With Non-Veterinarians

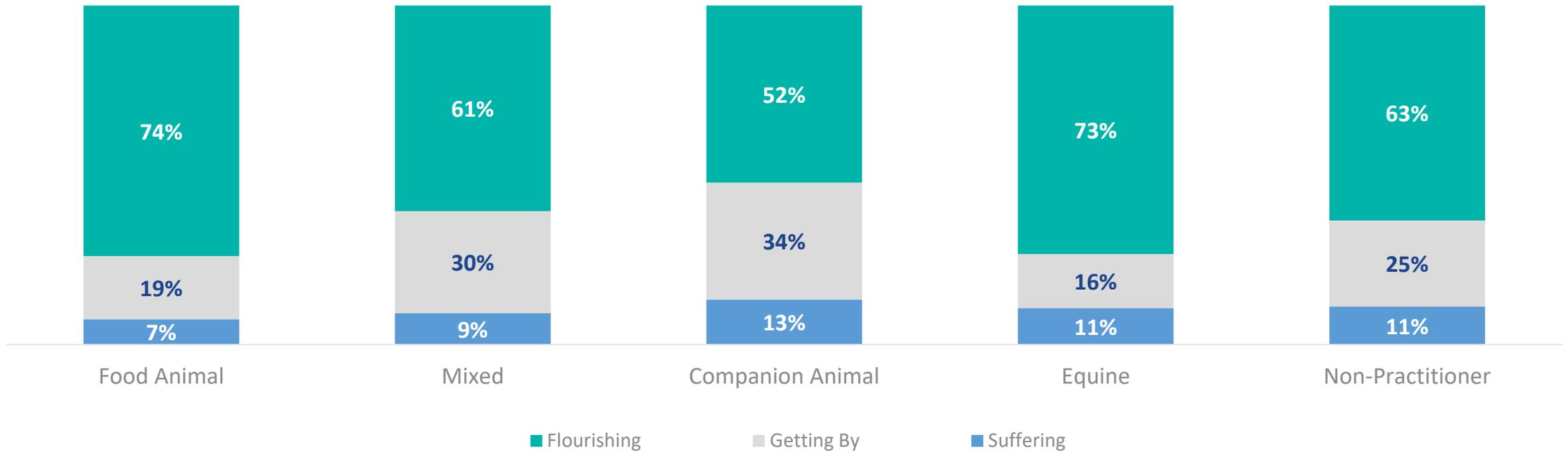


Base: All Respondents (n=2493)

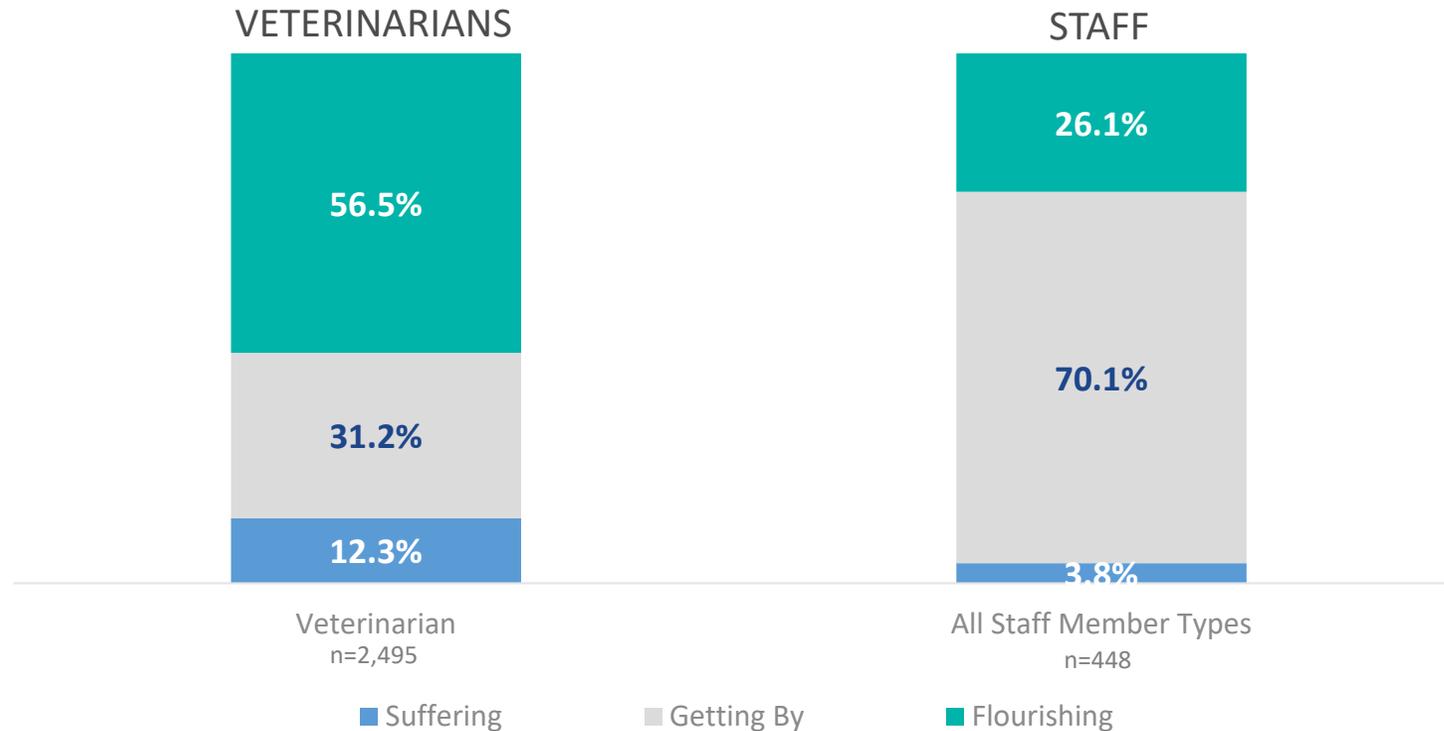


Wellbeing Varies by Age and Type of Employment

- On average, older veterinarians have higher wellbeing than younger
- Food animal and equine veterinarians have higher wellbeing than companion animal and mixed
- Percentage “suffering” has increased from 9.4% to 12.3% since 2019



Only One-fourth of Veterinary Clinic Staff Are Flourishing, Compared to More Than Half of Veterinarians, but Fewer Are Suffering

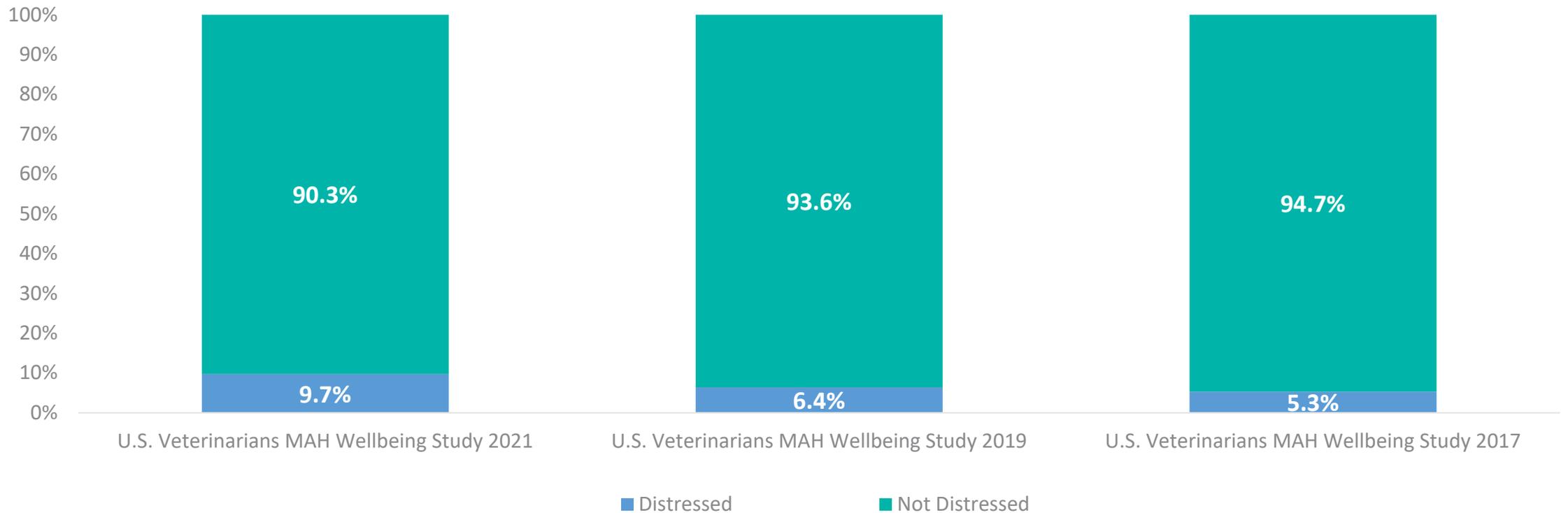


WB3. Suppose that the top of the ladder below represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?

Base: All Respondents

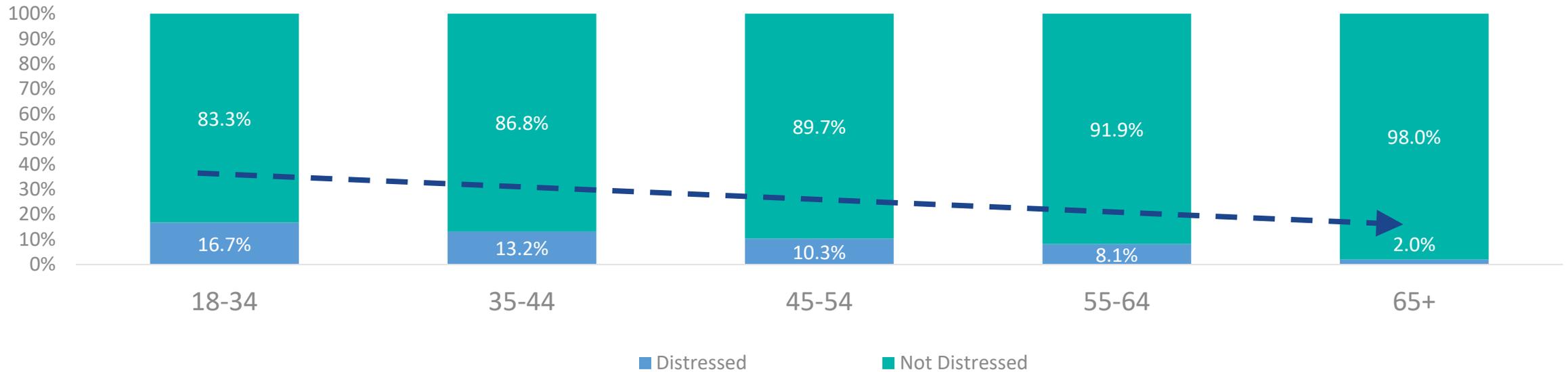
Serious Psychological Distress Has Increased

- Measured by Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler6)
- Contributing Factors: Personality, COVID/work hours, student debt

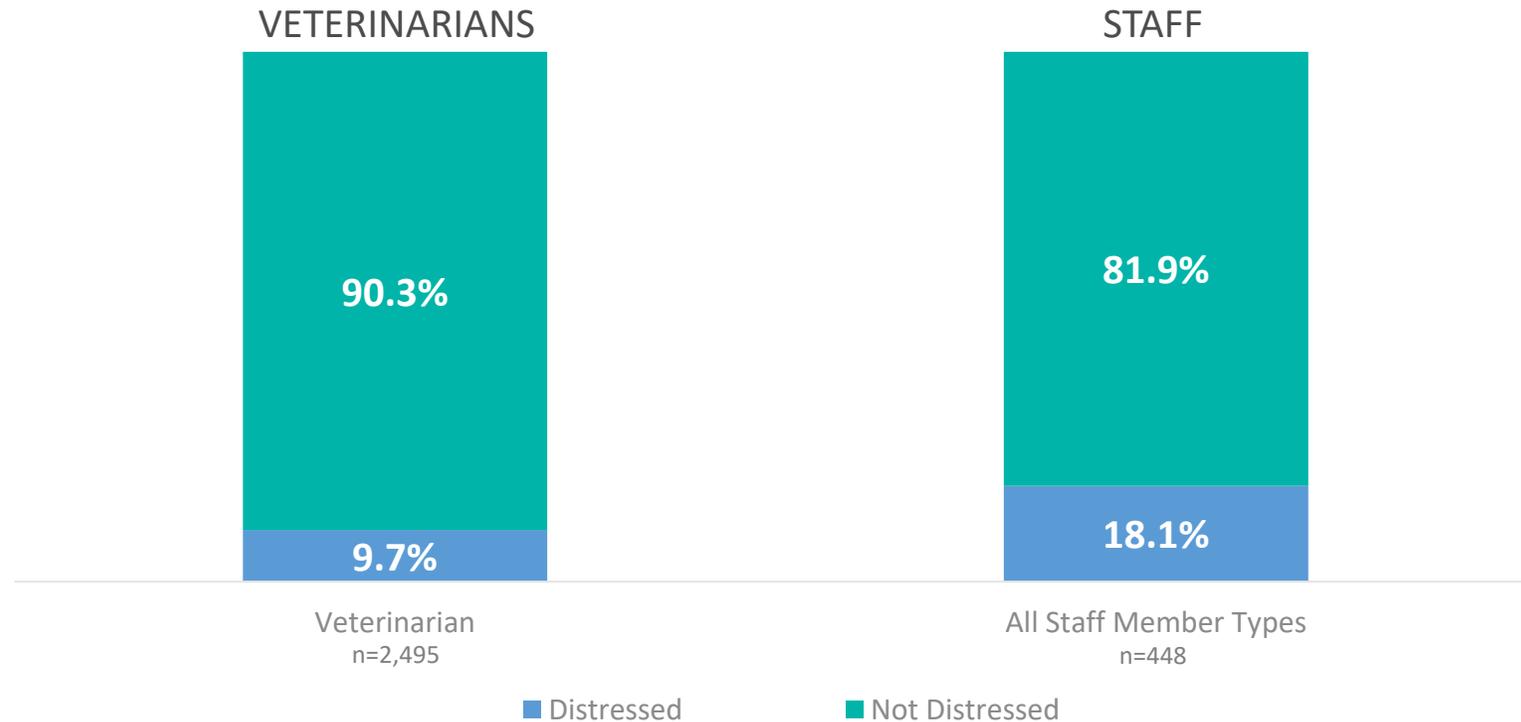


Serious Psychological Distress Has Increased in All Age Cohorts

- More Prevalent in Younger Veterinarians
- Largest increases among middle-age veterinarians
- Hispanic, Black veterinarians experiencing more distress than white veterinarians

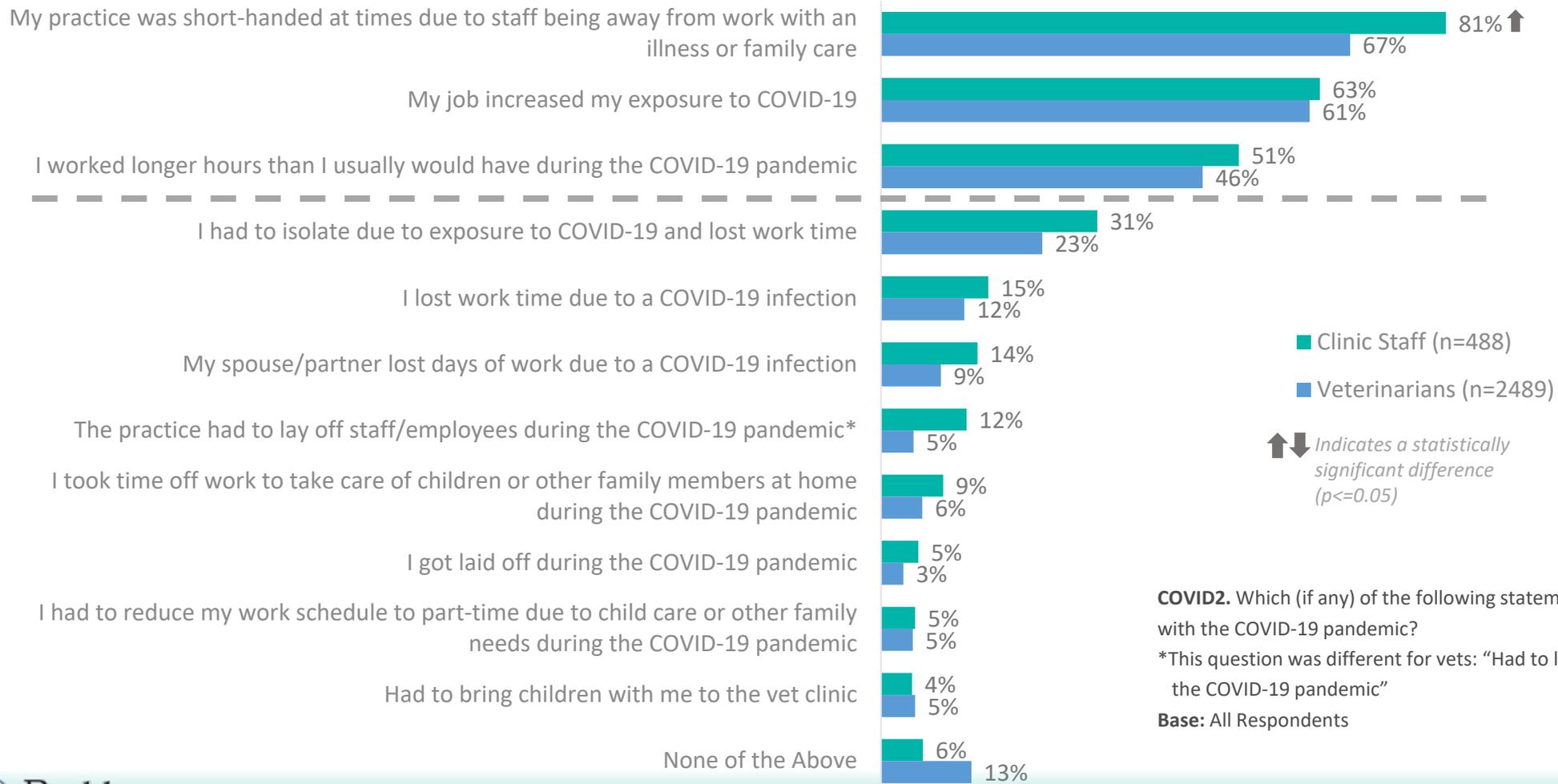


Prevalence of Serious Psychological Distress Is Nearly Twice as High Among Staff



MH1. Results based on results of Kessler 6.
Base: All Respondents

COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Most Veterinarians, and Staff Even More



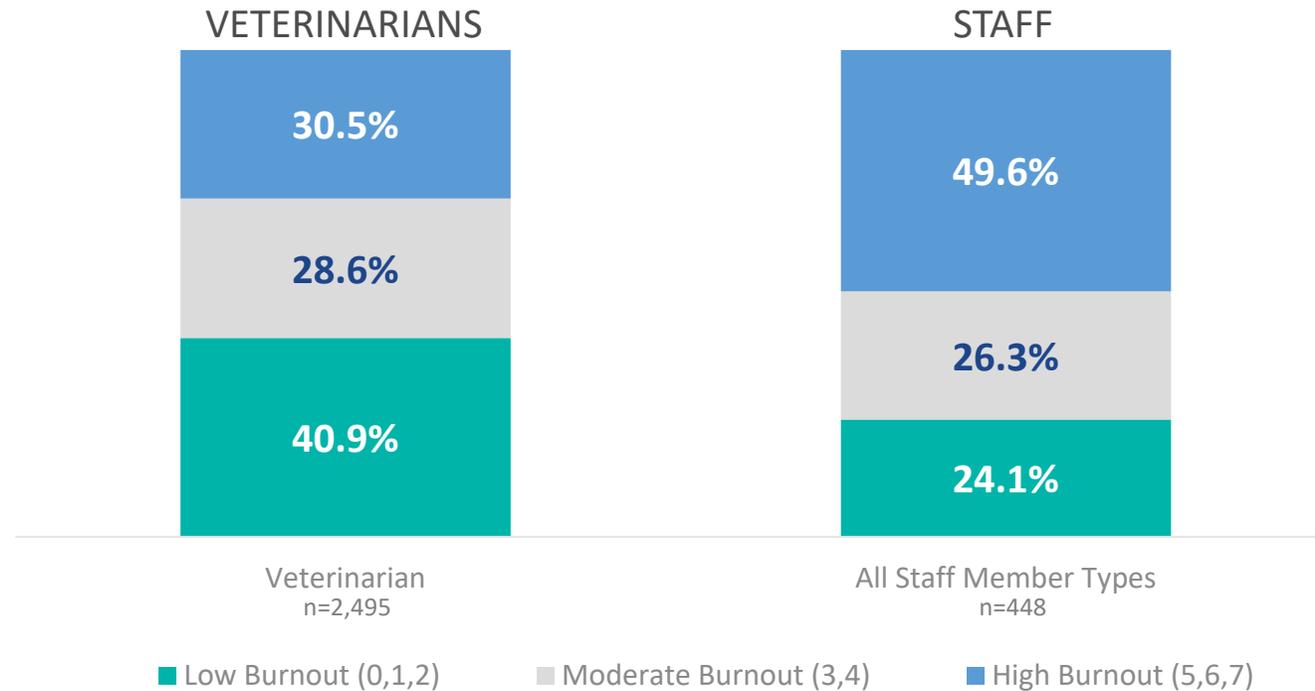
COVID2. Which (if any) of the following statements apply to your experience with the COVID-19 pandemic?

*This question was different for vets: "Had to lay off staff/employees during the COVID-19 pandemic"

Base: All Respondents

Both Veterinarians and Staff Experienced High Levels of Burnout

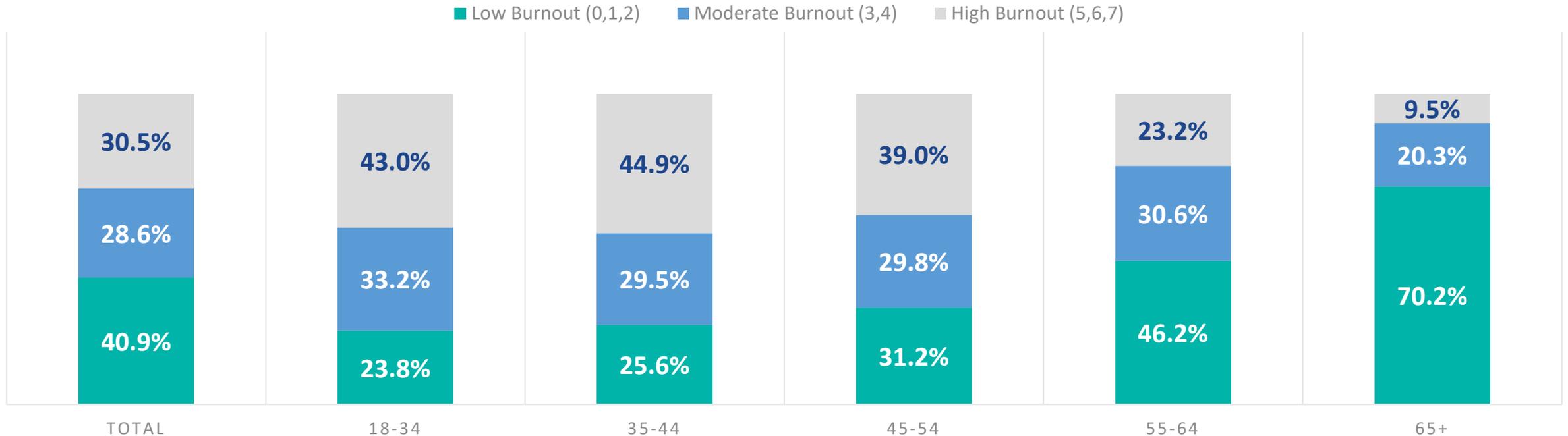
- Measured using Mayo Clinic Physicians Wellbeing Index
- Highly correlated with wellbeing and serious psychological distress



Mayo Burnout Scale
Base: All Respondents

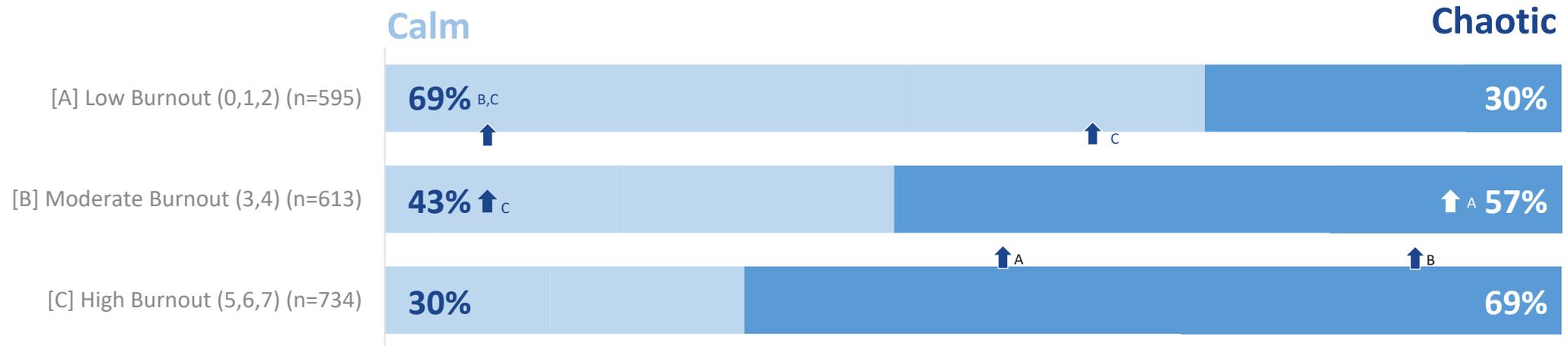
Burnout Highest Among Younger Veterinarians

- No change in burnout levels compared to 2019
- Not unique to veterinarians



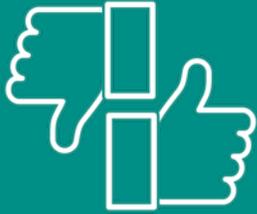
Work Schedule and Practice Atmosphere Affects Burnout for Both Veterinarians and Staff

- The more chaotic the practice, the higher the burnout of both veterinarians and staff
- Veterinarians who felt they had less control over their work experienced higher burnout
- The more hours per week and the more evening and weekend work, the higher the burnout



↑↓ Indicates a statistically significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$)

CLINIC2. How would you describe your clinic atmosphere?
 CLINIC3. How would you describe the approach to work in your clinic?
 Base: All Respondents

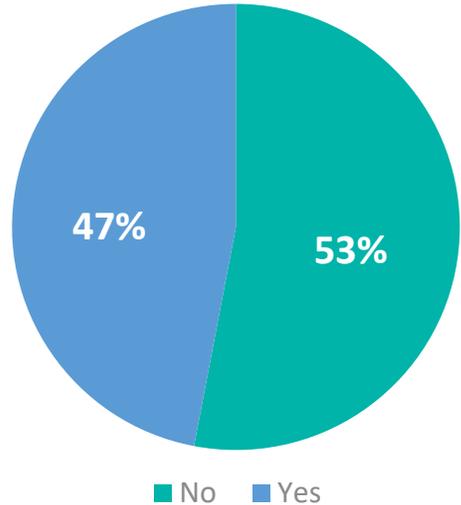


Attitude Towards the Profession

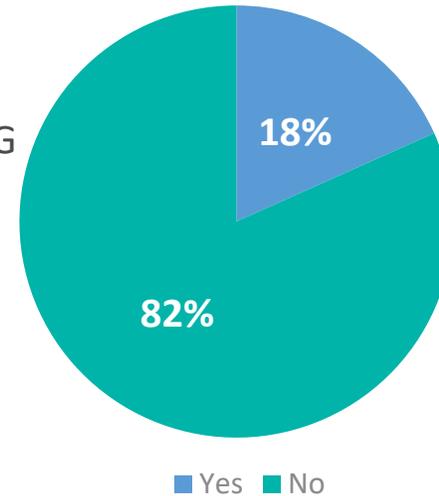
Less Than 50% Recommend VetMed as a Career; Nearly 1 in 5 Regret Becoming Veterinarian

- Those who work in a good clinic climate, have a healthy method for dealing with stress and are more extroverted are the most likely to recommend the profession.
- Those who are distressed (mental health), have lower wellbeing and feeling burned out are most likely to regret becoming a veterinarian

RECOMMEND BECOMING A VETERINARIAN



REGRET BECOMING A VETERINARIAN



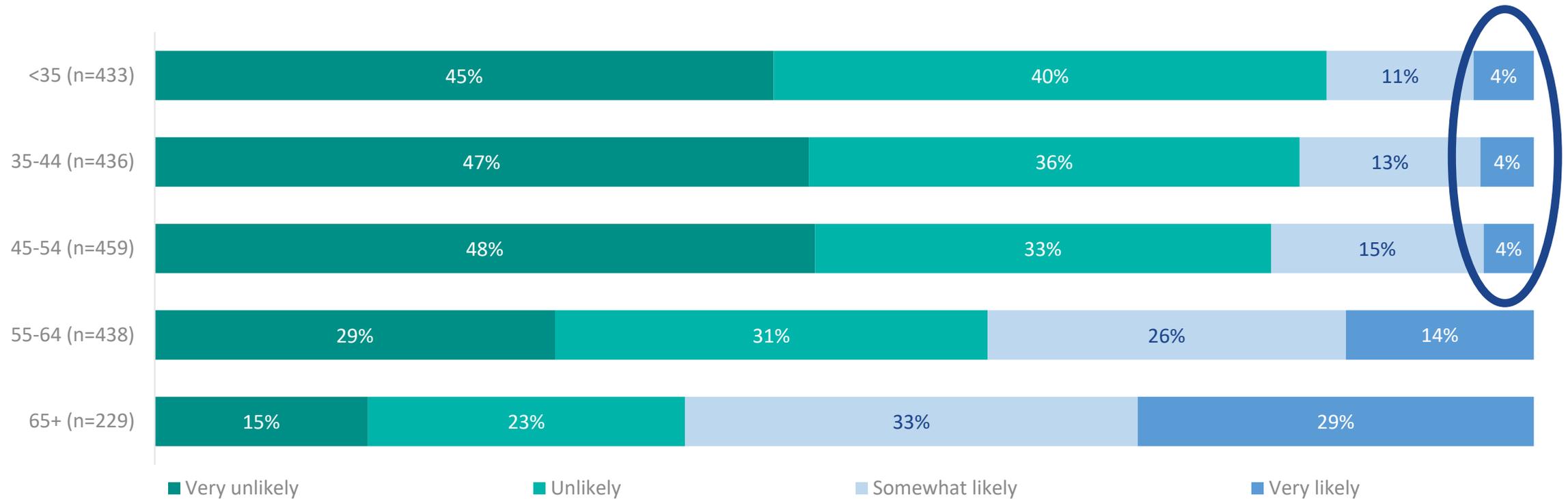
DEM17. Would you recommend a career in veterinary medicine to a friend or family member?

DEM18. Do you regret becoming a veterinarian?

Base: All Respondents

Very Few Veterinarians <55 Expect to Leave the Profession Within the Next 2 Years

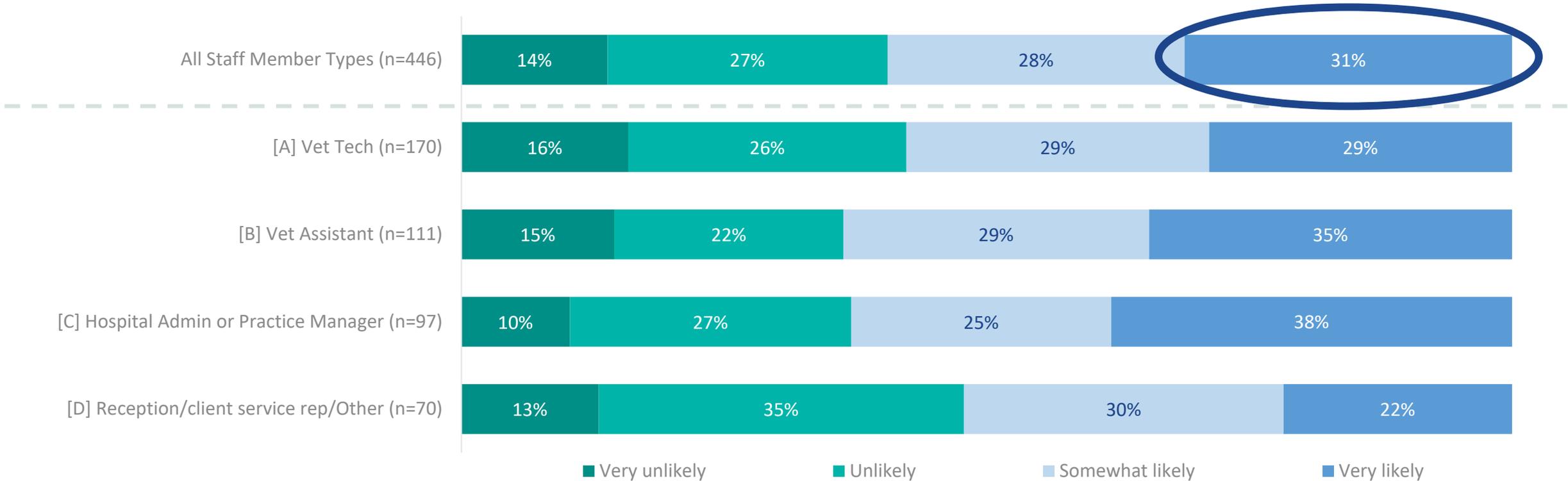
No significant exodus likely to happen



DEM19. How likely were you to leave veterinary medicine within two years?

Base: All Respondents

Nearly One-third of Veterinary Staff Are Likely to Leave Practice in the Next Two Years, However



DEM19. How likely are you to leave veterinary practice within two years?

Base: All Respondents



Actions Veterinarians and Employers Can Take to Reduce Distress and Improve Wellbeing

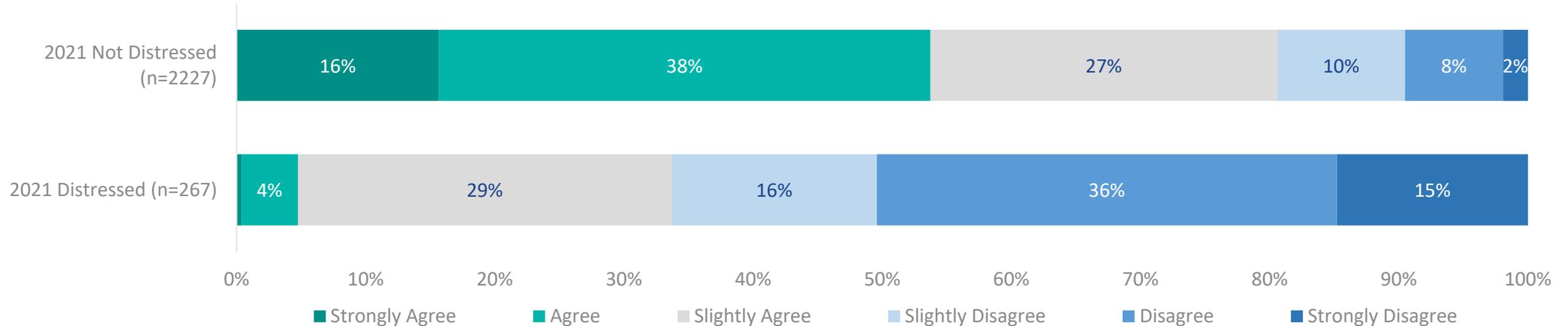


Actions That Veterinarians Can Take

1. Have a Healthy Approach to Dealing With Stress

- Inherently stressful profession
- Personality tendencies contribute
- A healthy coping method can help

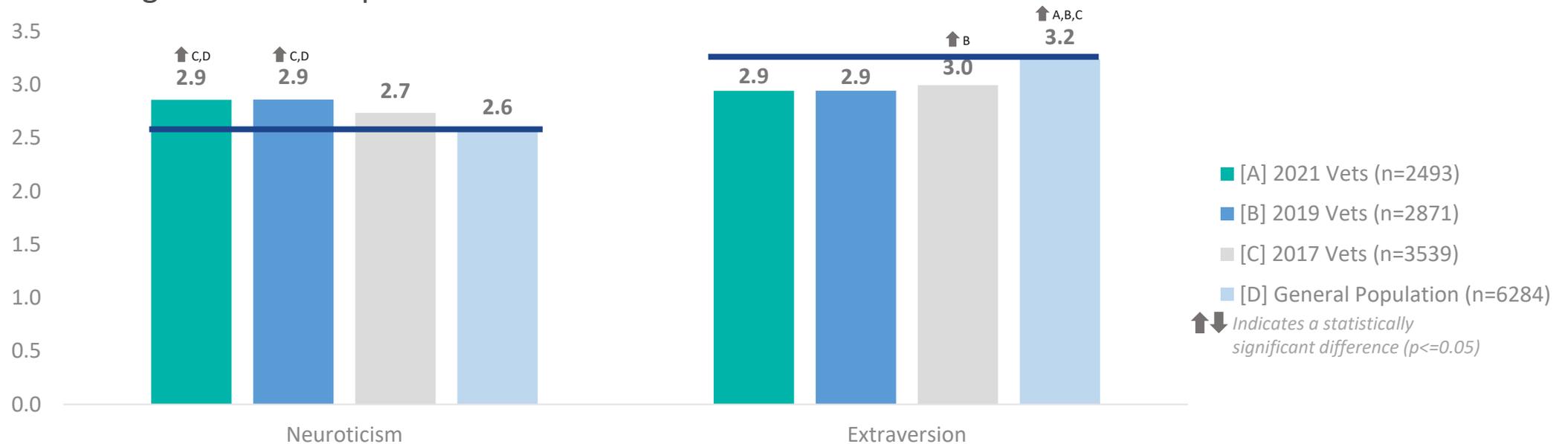
I HAVE A HEALTHY METHOD FOR DEALING WITH STRESS IN MY LIFE



MH13. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: I have a healthy method for dealing with stress in my life
Base: All Respondents

Personality Tendencies Make Coping Techniques Even More Important

- On average, veterinarians tend to be higher in neuroticism and lower in extraversion than non-veterinarians; both are proven predictors of wellbeing and mental health
 - On average, staff are even higher in neuroticism
- Individuals high in neuroticism tend to be worriers, and more vulnerable to stress, thus the importance of a good stress management technique



*Data from: Freedman, Vicki A. 2017. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics' Wellbeing and Daily Life Supplement (PSID-WB) User Guide: Final Release 1. Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

Stress Management Ideas That Work

Healthy Habits for Managing Stress

In addition to healthy activities, it's valuable for each individual to have a personal stress management plan. Such a plan includes activities you commit to doing daily. It's likely impossible to do everything on your stress management plan every day, but committing to one activity per day is doable and necessary to maintain health as a veterinary professional. Here are some examples:

> **Five to seven minutes of high-intensity interval training (HIIT).** HIIT generally involves a brief warm-up followed by physical activity (for example, fast walking, jogging, jumping jacks or stair climbing) followed by a brief cool-down period. The goal is to have a 2:1 ratio of work to recovery. HIIT works not only to reduce stress and improve condition, but also to improve glucose metabolism.

> **Breathing exercises.** Here's how one model, 4-7-8, works: Breathe in through your nose for four counts, hold your breath for seven counts, and breathe out for eight counts. Repeat. This can help you calm down during the day or fall back asleep at night by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system.

> **Relaxation techniques.** Here's a sample: Sit in a chair or lie still and concentrate on relaxing each part of your body, one limb at a time. Start with, say, your left foot, then left leg, right foot, then right leg, and so on. Keep each limb relaxed as you progress. Relax your head and neck last.

> **Eat yogurt.** Getting enough probiotics in your diet can help your central nervous system manage stress.¹

> **Eat snacks.** Eating plenty of fruits, veggies and nuts is not only good for your body but also supports positive improvement in mood.^{2,3}

> **Practice mindfulness.** Five minutes of mindfulness could look like this: Sit in a chair or cross-legged on the floor with your back straight. (If on the floor, sit on a pillow to raise your hips off the floor.) Breathe in and out for one count. Count your breaths out until you reach five. Start again. If you get to 10, you may notice your mind has wandered. That's OK and expected. Just start again. Consider downloading the app Insight Timer at insighttimer.com. It's free and includes several resources for learning to practice mindfulness.

> **Call a friend.** In this day and age, when we spend so much time emailing and texting, it's good to actually have a conversation. Call a personal friend or family member—a connection outside of work and someone who can help put your spirits. Even a 10-minute conversation can help put you in a better mood for them.

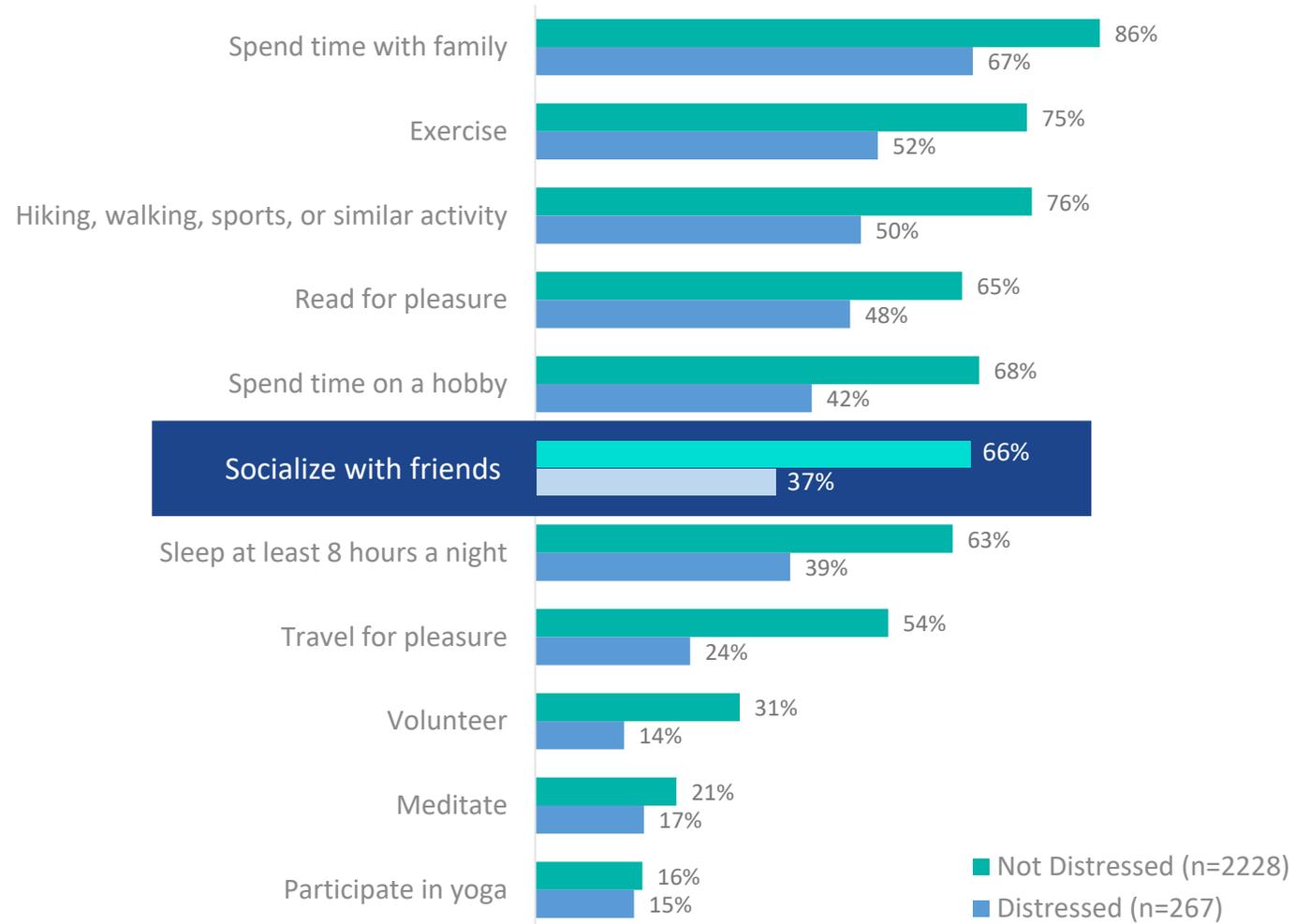
VetWellbeing.com

2. Have a Healthy Work-Life Balance

- Serious psychological distress is more common in veterinarians that work excessive hours
- Non-distressed veterinarians spend more time on healthy, non-work activities
- Socializing with family and friends is especially important to a healthy life

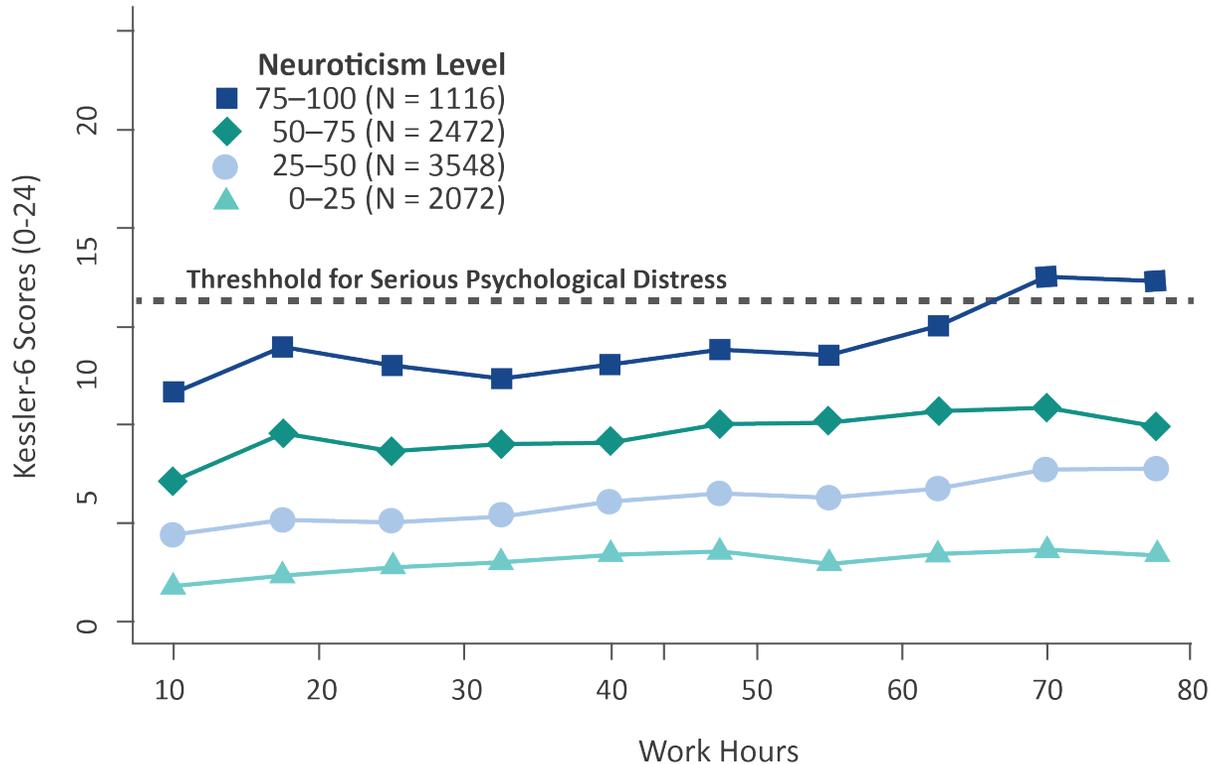
“Study after study shows that good social relationships are the strongest, most consistent predictor there is of a happy life.”

–Ruth Whippman, NYT



Working Extended Hours Increased Distress Scores More in Veterinarians High in Neuroticism

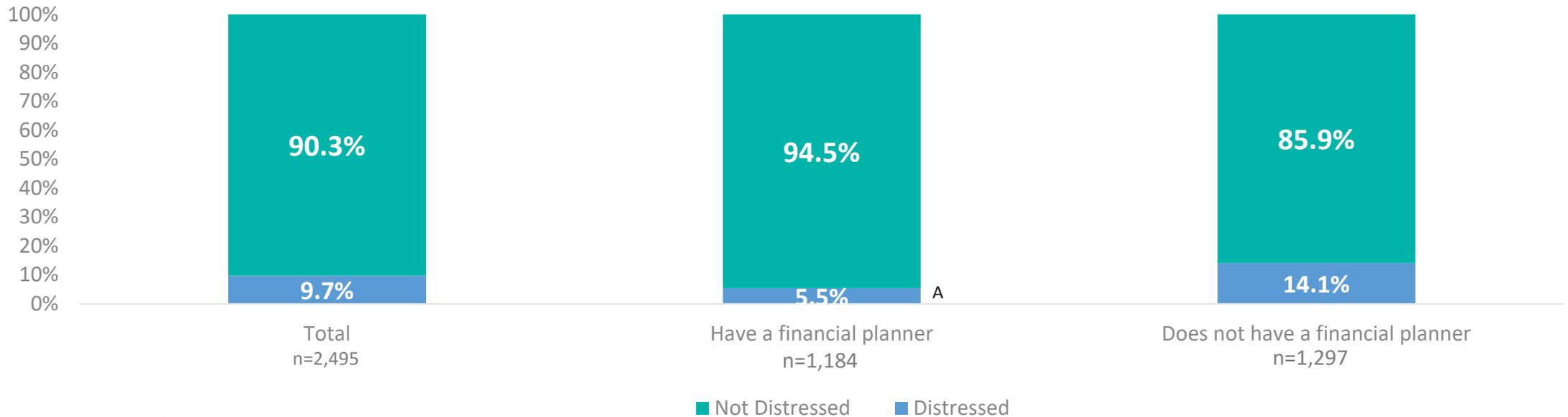
Kessler-6 Scored by Work Hours and Neuroticism



- Excessive hours worked a predictor of psychological distress
- Hours worked per week:
 - 40% worked >45 hours
 - 5% worked 60+ hours
- Half of veterinarians dissatisfied with number of hours worked
- Managing work-life balance is a function of setting boundaries

3. Engage a Financial Planner

- Serious psychological distress was lower in veterinarians with a financial planner
 - Student debt is a predictor of serious psychological distress
- Those with a financial planner pay off debt faster
- They also are less likely to carry costly credit card balances

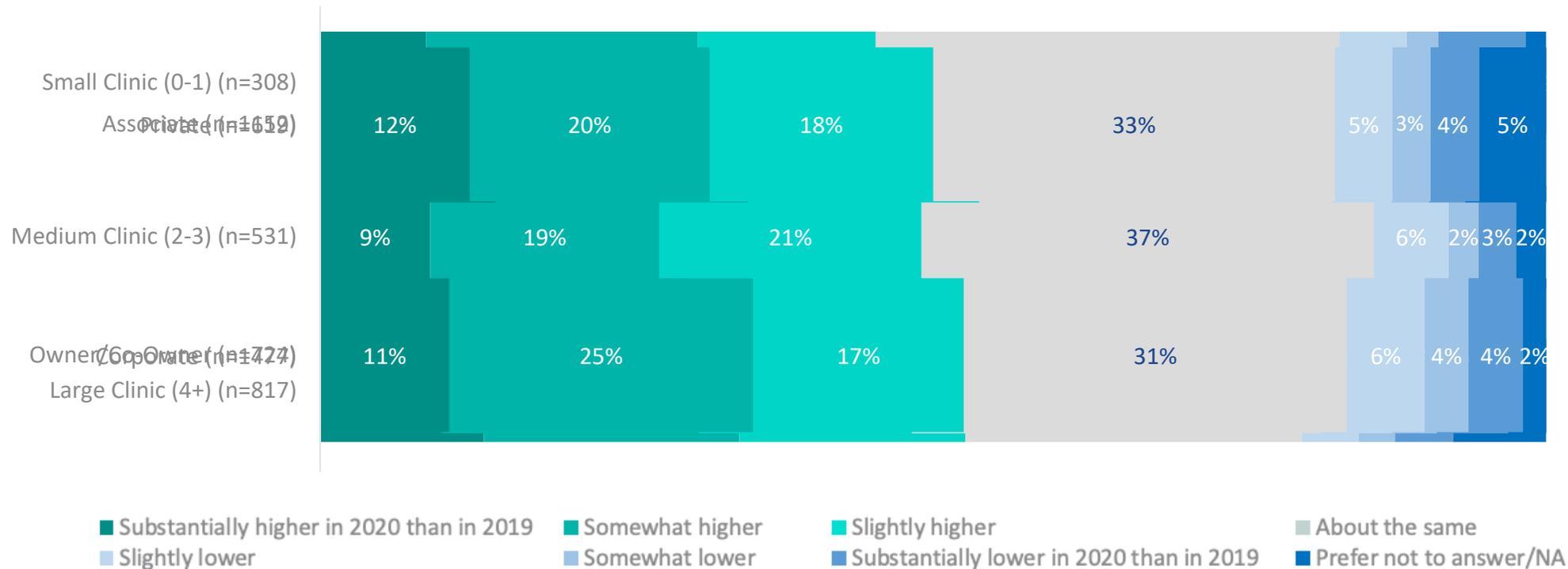


MH1. Results based on results of Kessler 6.
 Base: All Respondents

X Indicates a statistically significant difference between categories ($p < 0.05$)

Serious Psychological Distress Increased in Spite of Higher Pay for the Majority of Veterinarians

Pay increases in past year were higher than in previous studies.



DEM16. How did your personal annual income from employment or the practice of veterinary medicine in 2020 compare to 2019? My income in 2020 was:
 Base: All Respondents

Financial Planning & Counseling Resources



AVMA Managing Personal Finances Resources

- <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/personal-finance>

Student debt help: VIN Foundation Student Debt Center

- <vinfoundation.org/resources/student-debt-center/>

Financial Planning: National Association of Personal Financial Advisors

- [NAPFA.org](https://www.napfa.org)
- Fee-based financial planners

Pro bono financial counseling

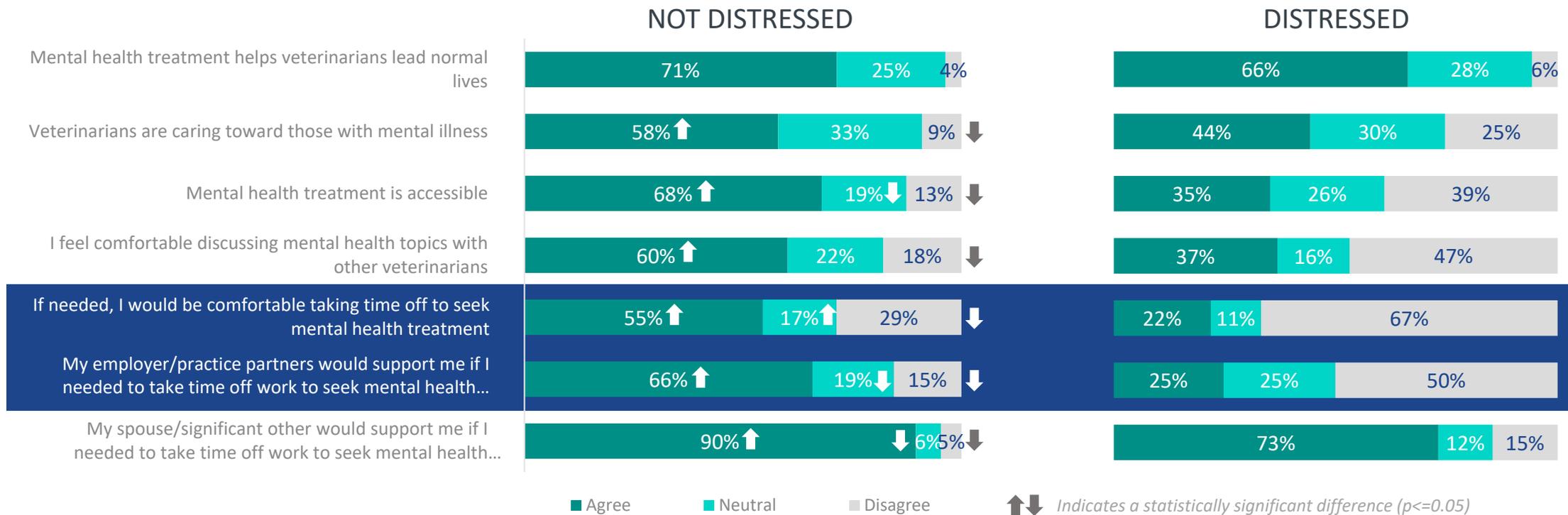
- NAPFA Foundation ([napfafoundation.org](https://www.napfafoundation.org))
- Financial Planning Association
([onefpa.org/advocacy/Pages/Pro Bono Financial Planning.aspx](https://www.onefpa.org/advocacy/Pages/Pro_Bono_Financial_Planning.aspx))
- National Foundation for Credit Counseling ([nfcc.org](https://www.nfcc.org))



Actions That Employers Can Take

1. Acknowledge Low Wellbeing and Mental Distress and Encourage Team Members to Address It

Less distressed team members feel their mental wellbeing is supported by their employers

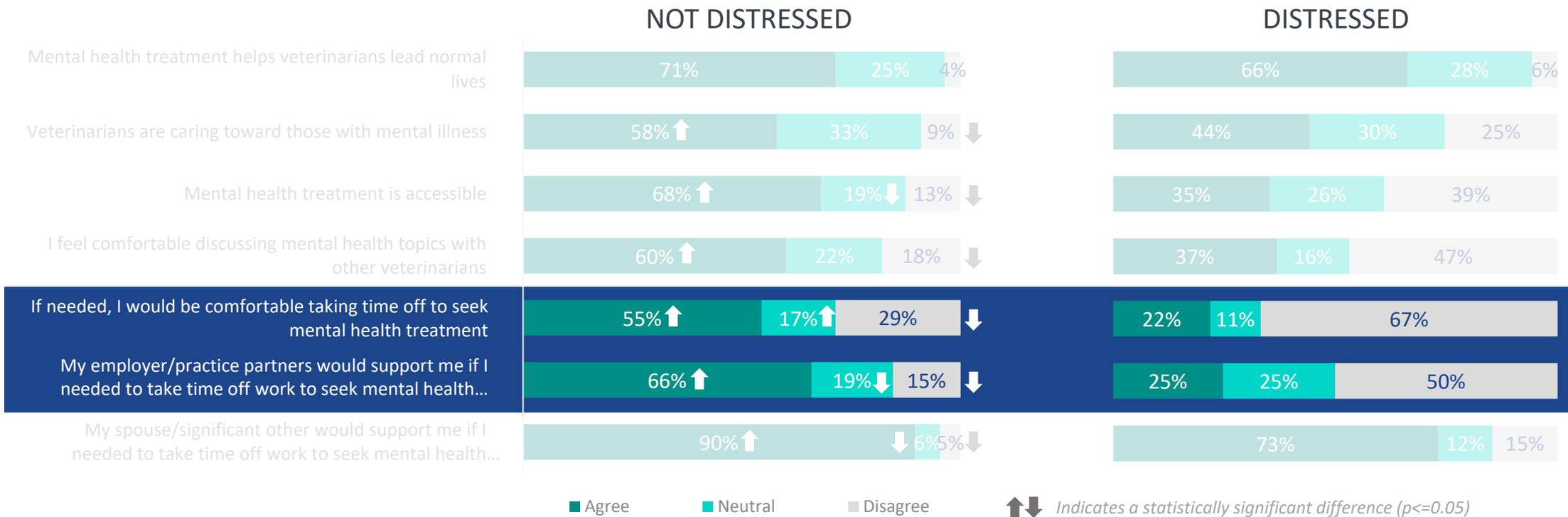


MH9. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements using the scale provided.

Base: All Respondents [Not Distressed (n=2221), Distress (n=267)]

1. Acknowledge Low Wellbeing and Mental Distress and Encourage Team Members to Address It

Less distressed team members feel their mental wellbeing is supported by their employers



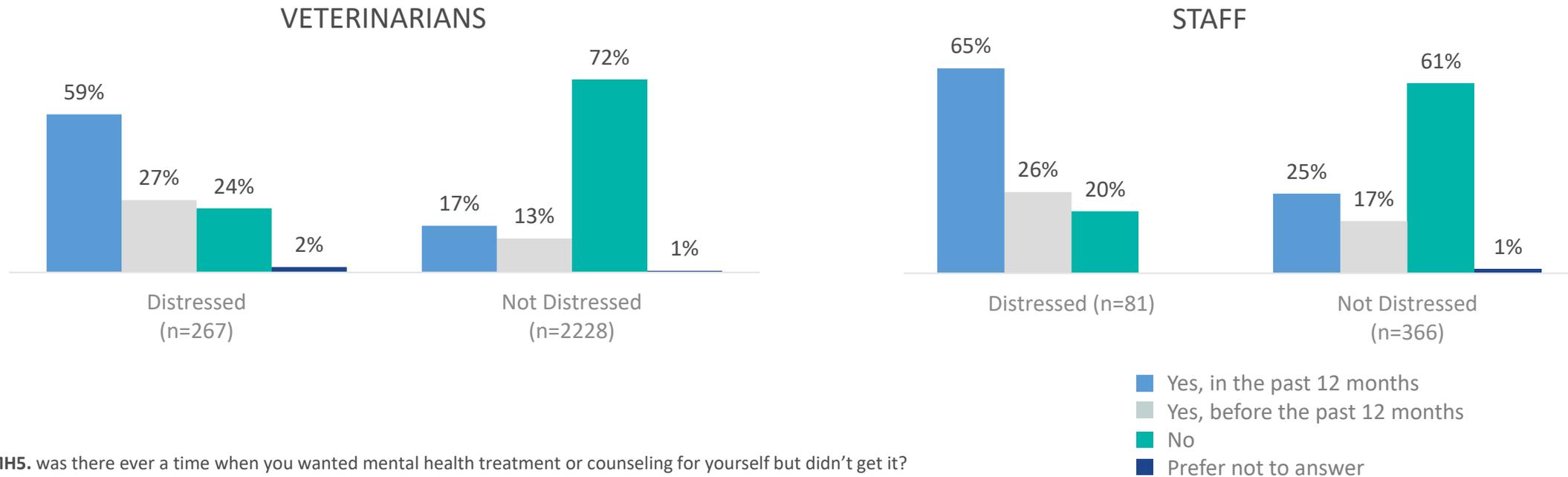
MH9. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements using the scale provided.

Base: All Respondents [Not Distressed (n=2221), Distress (n=267)]

A Majority of Those Most In Need Didn't Get It

- 59% of veterinarians with serious psychological distress knew they needed help within the past year but didn't or couldn't get it
- Even 17% of those not seriously distressed felt the need but did not receive it

Needed MH Treatment or Therapy but Didn't Get It



MH5. was there ever a time when you wanted mental health treatment or counseling for yourself but didn't get it?

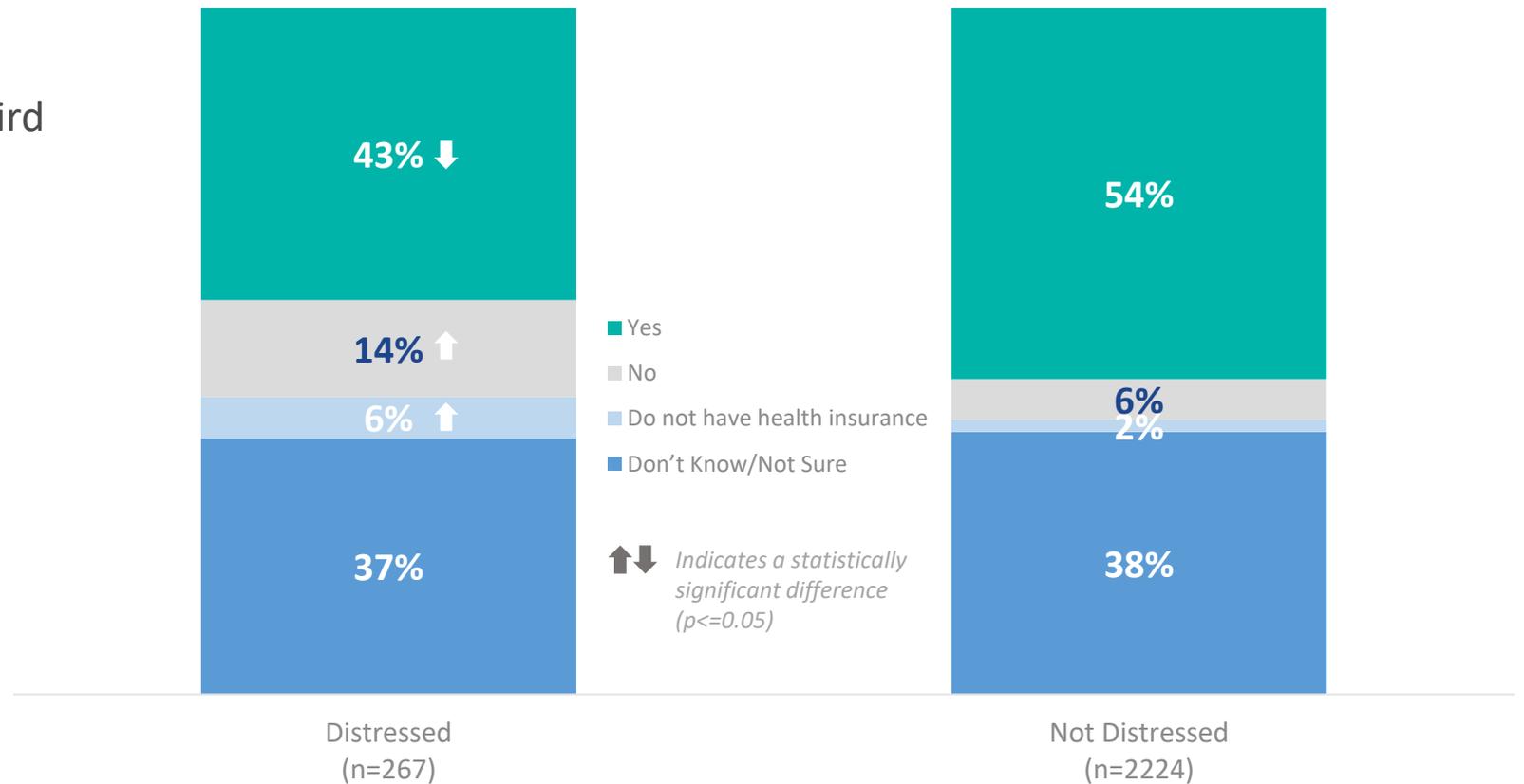
Base: All Respondents

2. Provide Resources in the Form of Health Insurance and an Employee Assistance Program

While about half of veterinarians say their insurance covers mental health treatment, more than a third don't know



Health Insurance Covers Mental Health Counseling or Treatment



MH12. Does your health insurance provide coverage for mental health counseling or other treatment?

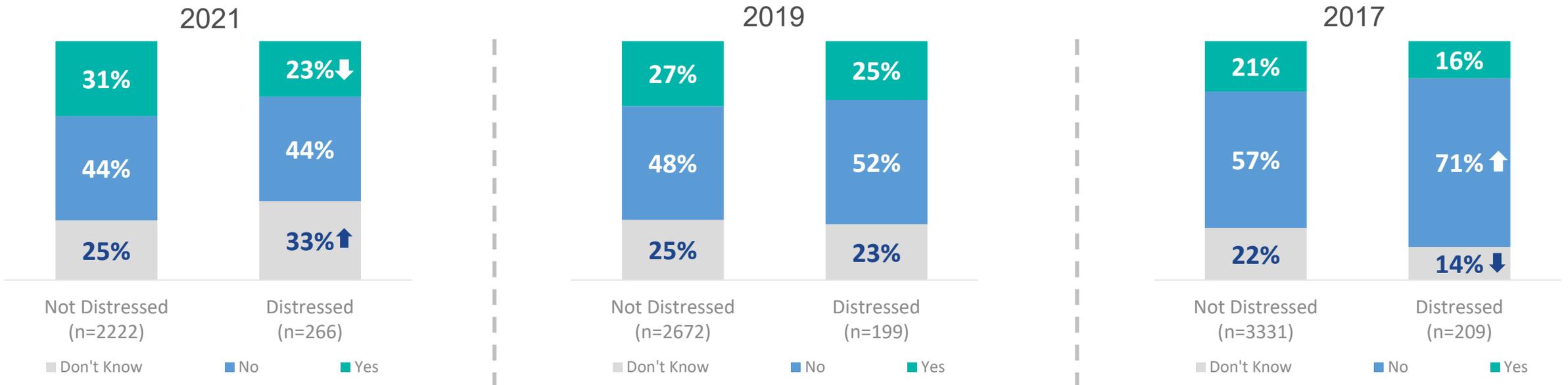
Base: All Respondents

While the Use of Employee Assistance Programs Have Grown, Fewer Than One-third Have Access

- Many veterinarians don't know if they have an EAP or not
- EAPs are available to nearly any employer through third-party providers



Employer has an Employee Assistance Program



MH10. Does your practice or employer offer an Employee Assistance Program (a program that helps assist employees with personal problems and/or work-related problems that may impact their job performance, physical or mental health, or emotional wellbeing.)

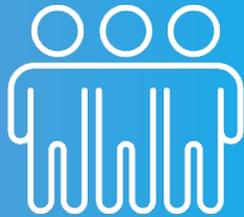
Base: All Respondents

↑↓ Indicates a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

3. Provide a Work Climate That Fosters Wellbeing and Mental Health

In multiple regression analysis, a good practice climate was the most powerful predictor of good mental health and a high level of wellbeing for both veterinarians and support staff

Elements of a good work climate:



A STRONG SENSE
OF BELONGING
TO A TEAM



HIGH DEGREE OF
TRUST IN THE
ORGANIZATION



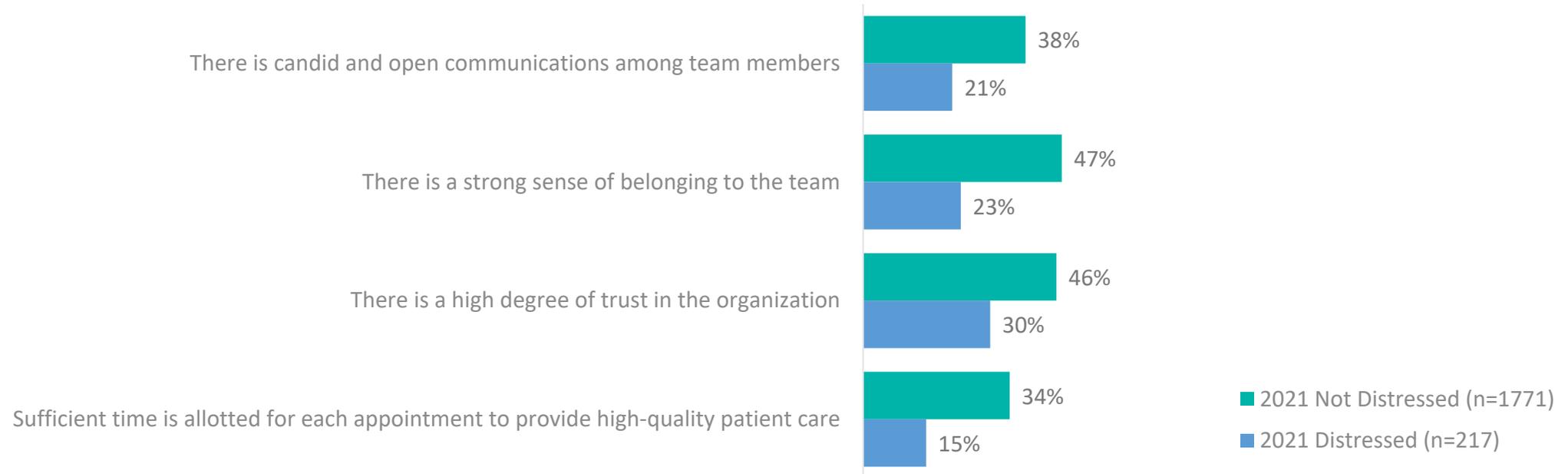
CANDID AND OPEN
COMMUNICATIONS
AMONG TEAM MEMBERS



SUFFICIENT TIME TO
PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY
PATIENT CARE

Clinic Climate: Distressed Veterinarians Rated Their Work Environment Less Favorably

- Across the board there was substantial room for improvement
- Younger veterinarians especially were less likely to feel they had adequate time to do the job properly

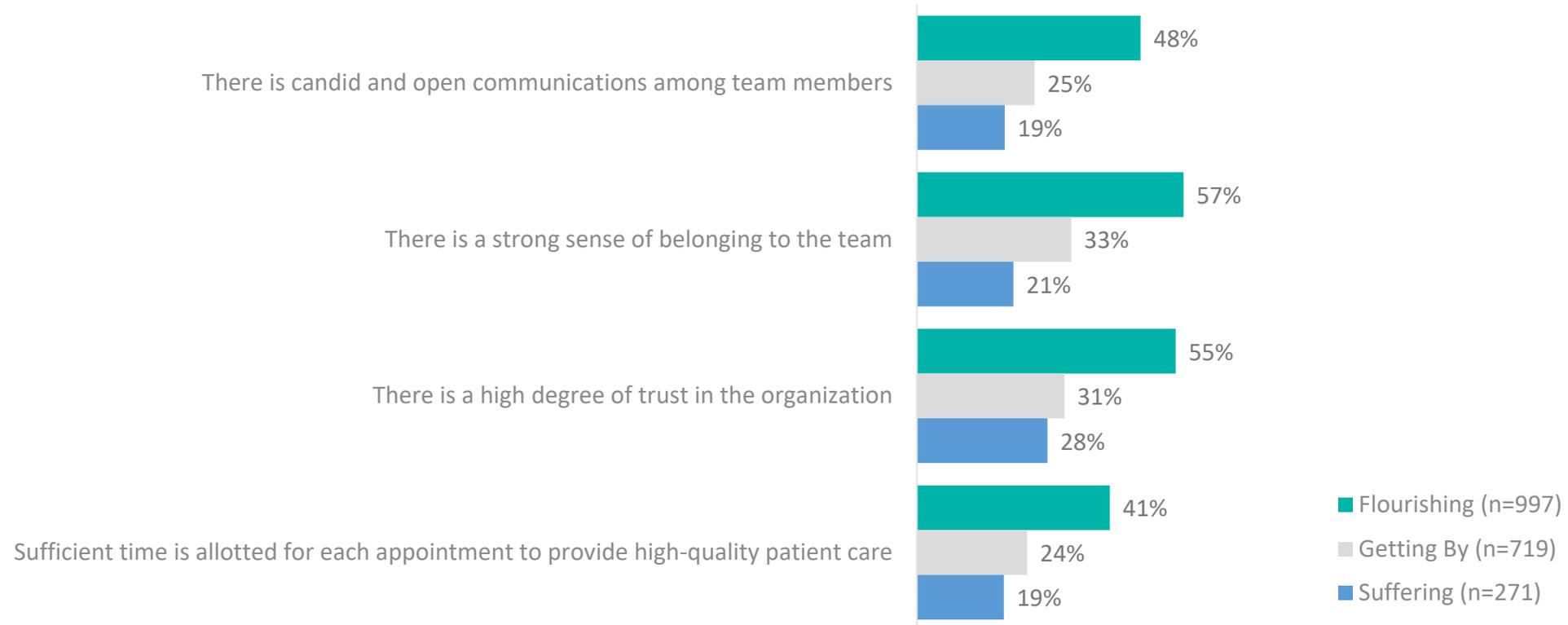


Showing Top 1 (Great Extent)

CLINIC5. Please indicate how well each of the following describes your practice

Base: Practicing Veterinarians

Clinic Climate Also Contributed Substantially to Higher Levels of Wellbeing and Less Burnout



Showing Top 1 (Great Extent)

CLINIC5. Please indicate how well each of the following describes your practice

Base: Practicing Veterinarians



Conclusions / Q&A



Conclusions

- Veterinarians continue to see stress, suicide and student debt as very critical issues facing the profession
- Personnel shortage, especially for support staff, are now one of the biggest problems facing practices
- Wellbeing of veterinarians is consistent with non-veterinarians, although it has declined somewhat in the last two years; staff wellbeing is lower
- More veterinarians suffered from serious psychological distress than two years ago; no doubt due in large part to the pandemic; staff distress was even higher
- Burnout remains an issue with veterinarians and staff, as it does for a majority of Americans
- While about half would not recommend the profession, and a few even regret becoming veterinarians, there is no reason to expect a substantial exodus of vets in the years ahead
- About a third of support staff expect to leave veterinary practice in the next two years, however
- This research has demonstrated that there are concrete things that veterinarians and their employers can do to make substantial improvements in wellbeing and mental health





Q&A