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Mental Health in Wildlife Rehabilitation



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Abstract

Background

Currently wildlife rehabilitation is a relatively unresearched area, both the animal and the human side. It is widely accepted that those working within the animal industry often struggle with their mental health for several reasons. Wildlife rehabilitation occurs in a number of settings including established wildlife rehabilitation centres and home environments.

Aims

To investigate how individuals' mental health is impacted when working within wildlife rehabilitation and determine whether there is reason for further investigation in the area.

Methods

A twelve-question survey was advertised in a number of online forums targeted towards wildlife rehabilitators. 107 individuals responded to the survey over a period of five days. Those that responded to the survey were a mix of people rehabilitating wildlife at home (49%) and those working within a wildlife centre (51%). Those working in wildlife rehabilitation at home are a mixture of solo rehabilitators and those working within fostering networks.

Results

The results of the survey showed that there was a high level of poor mental health within wildlife rehabilitators, regardless of if they worked within a wildlife centre or a home environment. The most common factors negatively impacting mental health were a poor work/life balance and human related issues including workplace bullying, lack of support within the industry and negative interactions with members of the public.

Conclusions

The data shows that there is significant reason for further research in the area to develop better support systems for those working within wildlife rehabilitation. It also shows that there are areas of wildlife rehabilitation which should be researched and adapted to minimise the negative impact on workers mental health. Mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £117.9 billion annually according to a new report published [recently] by the Mental Health Foundation and London School of Economics and Political Science (G. Davidson, 2022). It is suggested that poor work/life balance is one of the highest reasons for poor mental health. There is room for investigation surrounding the current structure of wildlife rehabilitation and whether funding from external sources could improve conditions which may in turn reduce the level of poor mental health within the industry.

Introduction

Wildlife rehabilitation is the treatment and temporary care of injured, diseased, and displaced animals, and the subsequent release of healthy animals to appropriate habitats in the wild (Sclieps & Miller, 2021). As individuals working within other caregiving roles are known to struggle with their mental health, this study is looking at the mental health and wellbeing of individuals working within the field of wildlife rehabilitation. This also briefly touches on factors that may negatively impact mental health.

Mental health does not exist on its own. It is an integral and essential part of overall health, which can be defined in at least three ways – as the absence of disease, as a state of the organism that allows the full performance of all its functions or as a state of balance within oneself and between oneself and one's physical and social environment (Sartorius, 2002). There is currently very little data surrounding the mental health and wellbeing of those working within wildlife rehabilitation. Epidemiological data are essential for setting priorities within health and within mental health and it is also an important tool for advocacy (WHO, 2001). This study aims to assess the state of mental health in a small population of wildlife rehabilitators, with the aim to provide a stepping stone to further studies looking into factors, the impact on the delivery of care and help systems for individuals and organisations.

Method

Using JotForm, a twelve-question survey was created gathering basic information on how long individuals had been working in wildlife rehabilitation and in what setting. The survey then asked questions surrounding the individual's mental health and factors that negatively impact the individual. Finally, the survey asks about coping mechanisms and gives respondents the opportunity to add their own thoughts and feelings surrounding mental health in wildlife rehabilitation. Participants were also given the opportunity to add their email address to receive the results of the survey. This survey was developed and carried out in line with all applicable UK and EU data protection laws.

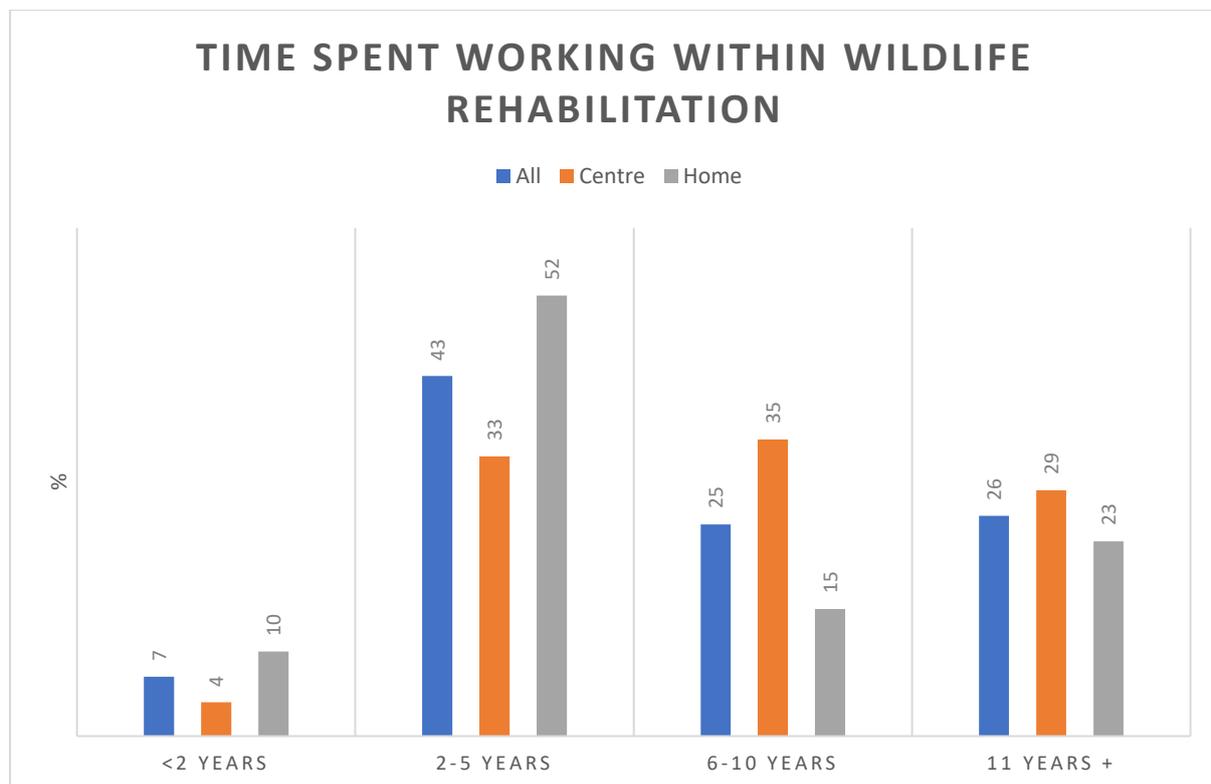
The survey was distributed on groups on social media aimed towards wildlife rehabilitators. These groups included 'One Voice for Animals UK', 'Wildlife Care Badge' and 'Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Professionals', along with several other smaller groups. This was to try and reach both those working in wildlife centres and those rehabilitating wildlife in a home environment. The survey was distributed a number of times over the five-day period (31st August 2023 – 4th September 2023).

The data was then split into three categories: all respondents, those who worked in a wildlife centre and those who worked in a home environment. The data for each category was then shown in graph form to allow for easy comparison. All data is shown as a percentage of those in each category.

Results

Demographics

In total, 107 responses were received over the five-day period between 31 August and 4 September 2023. 43% of all participants stated that they have been working within wildlife rehabilitation for two to five years. However, when split into those that worked in a wildlife centre and those that worked in a home environment, 52% of those working in a home environment had been working within wildlife rehabilitation for two to five years, whereas 35% of those working in a wildlife centre had been working within wildlife rehabilitation for six to ten years. A higher percentage of the respondents working within a centre had been working in wildlife rehabilitation for eleven or more years than those working within a home environment. Further studies should seek to elucidate whether this is due to the nature of the working environment, or whether those working in a home environment move to work within a centre after a period of time. It would be of benefit to determine whether those working within a centre environment initially started working within wildlife rehabilitation in a home environment or vice versa.

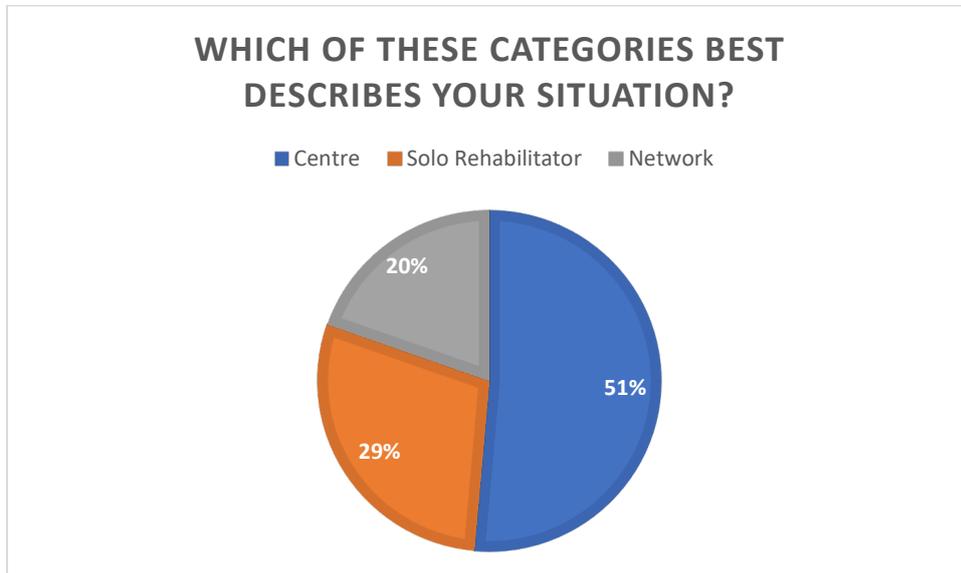


Graph 1

In this report, those working as solo rehabilitators or within a network are grouped together under the term 'home rehabilitators'. This is purely to describe the location in which the rehabilitation process is taking place. It is acknowledged that those working from 'home' may have additional sites such as release sites or enclosures based away from their home.

The structure in which wildlife rehabilitation is undertaken is not well understood with many people rehabilitating wildlife privately, in a home environment. This may result in their efforts being overlooked as they do not benefit from the financial and organisational support that some wildlife

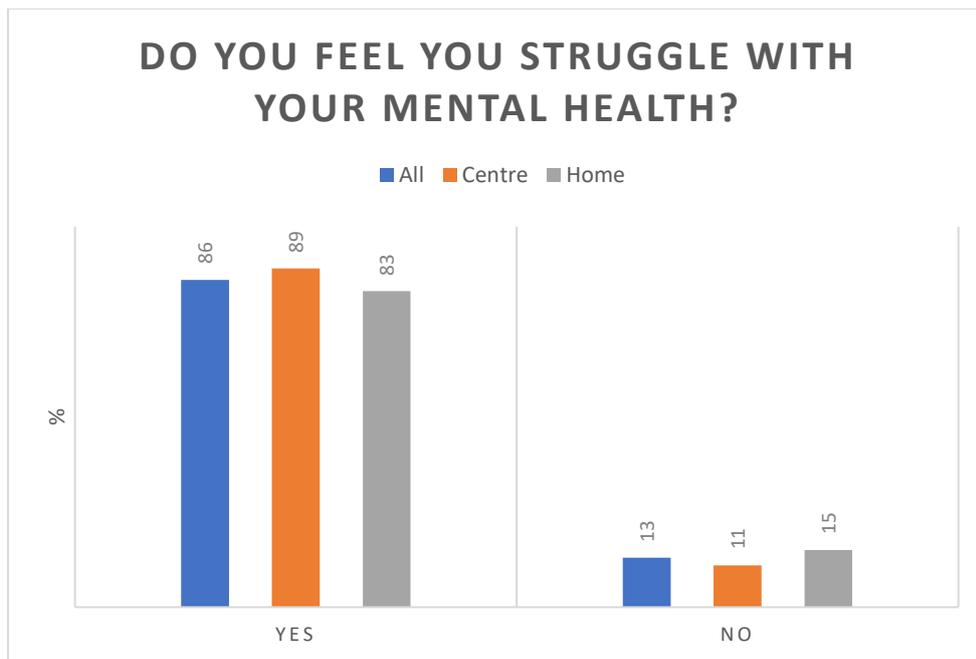
centres may have. With 51% of respondents working within a wildlife centre and 49% working from home, this may challenge pre-conceptions that most wildlife rehabilitation is carried out through dedicated centres.



Graph 2

Do you feel you struggle with your mental health?

A study looking at mental health amongst UK veterinary undergraduates states that just over half (54 per cent) of the respondents had ever experienced mental ill-health (J. M. Cardwell MA, 2013). Our survey shows that a far higher percentage of those working within wildlife rehabilitation struggle with their mental health. This strongly indicates that this area of animal work is worth conducting further research into, to determine whether there are more areas of support that can be provided. With mental health costing an estimated £117.9 billion annually (G. Davidson, 2022) further research could lead to methods which lead to mental health concerns being addressed as early as possible and therefore reducing the impact on the individual and the cost to the government.

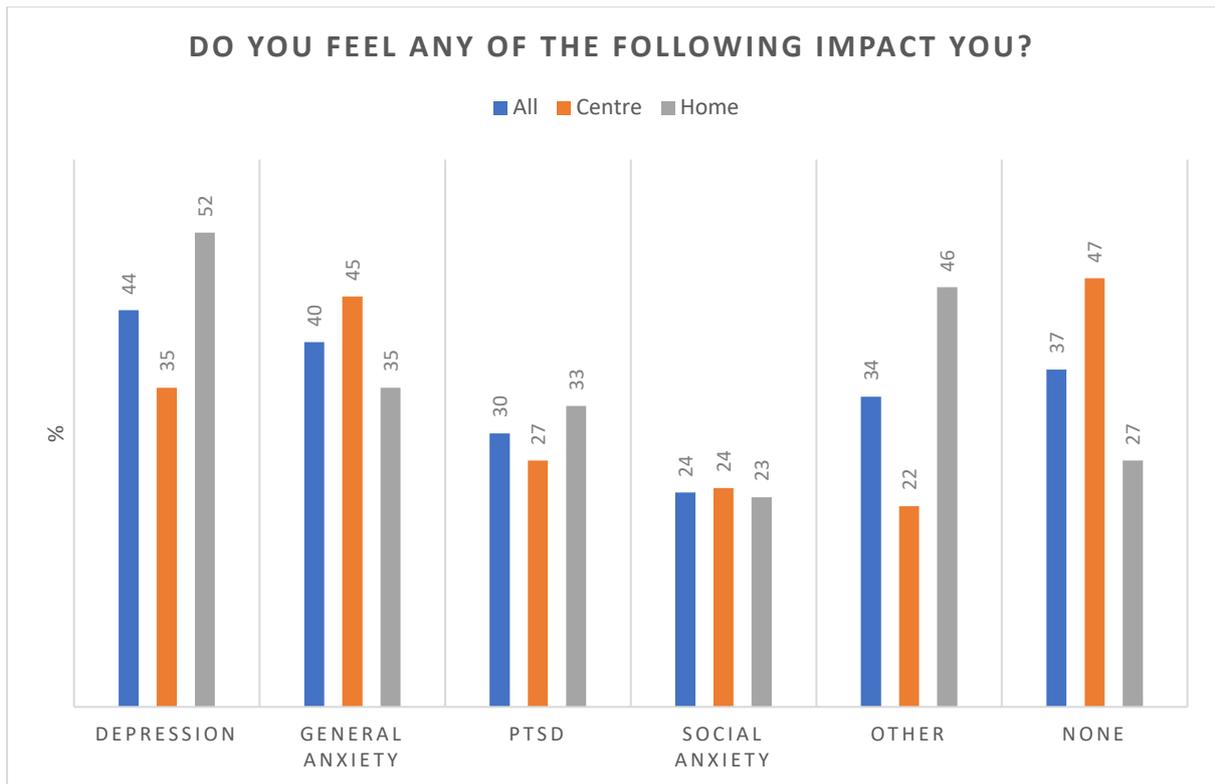


Graph 3

Do you feel any of the following impact you? (No formal diagnosis necessary)

This question was included to try and determine if there were any common conditions within those working in wildlife rehabilitation. The most commonly diagnosed conditions within the UK were included with the option for respondents to select 'other' and include other conditions. Some conditions that were added included bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Anxiety and depression were the most common conditions to impact the respondents with 44% stating that they feel depression impacts them and 40% stating they felt general anxiety disorder impacted them.

It is worth noting that the figure shows the number of mentions for each condition, with a number of respondents noting the presence of multiple conditions. When considering the response to depression of the 107 respondents 47 people stated they felt they were impacted by depression.

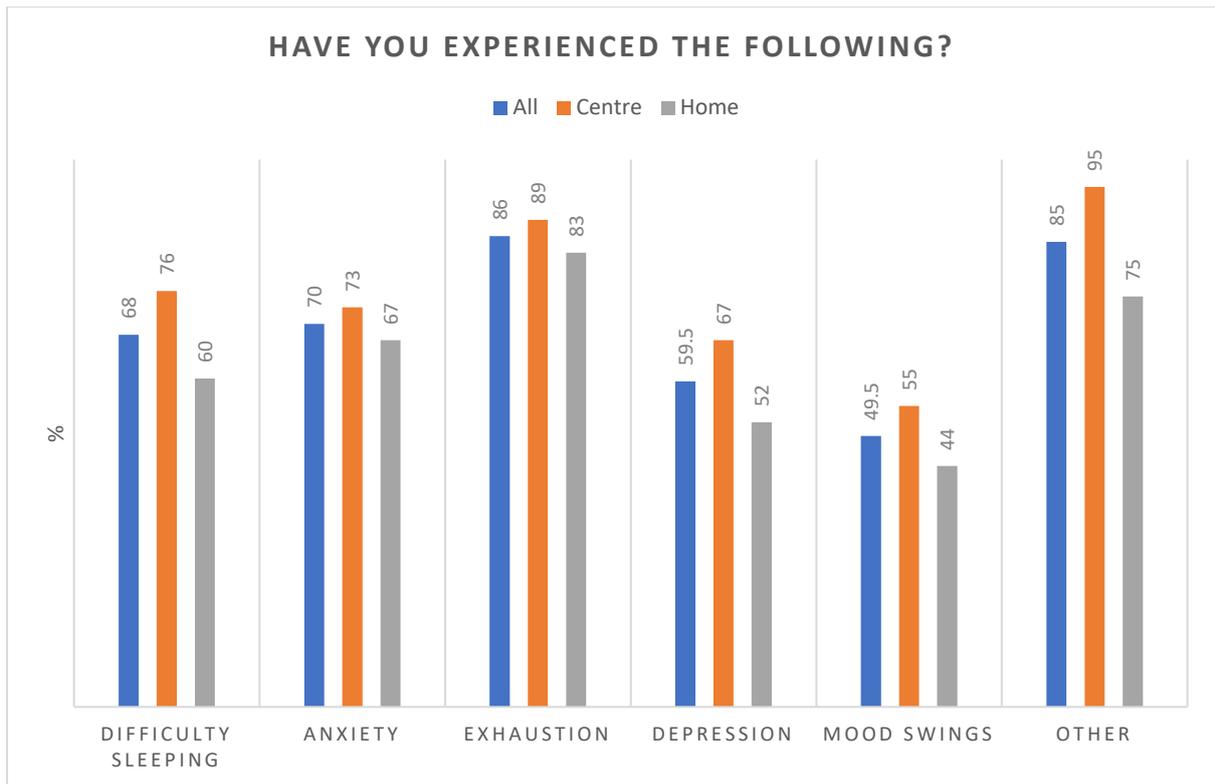


Graph 4

During your time working within wildlife rehabilitation, have you experienced any of the following?

Our survey found that 68% of participants had difficulty sleeping with 86% feeling exhaustion at times. It would be of benefit to ask questions about how participants feel their sleep impacts their work. In another study conducted to look at the wellbeing of veterinary professionals, it was found that 72% had poor quality sleep and 74.7% reported mistakes due to work related fatigue (Tz Ho, Santoro, Palacios Jimenez, & Pelligand, 2023).

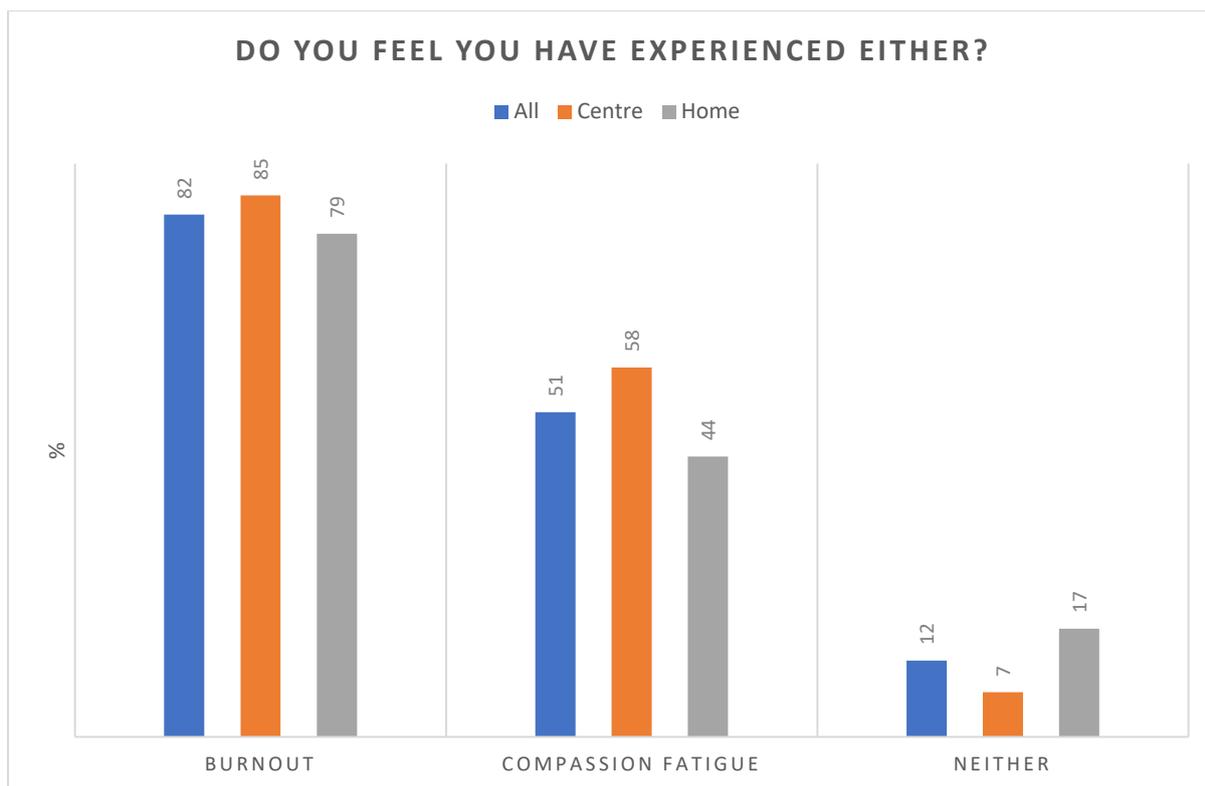
With such high numbers of those working in wildlife centres experiencing anxiety, difficulty sleeping and exhaustion, policies stipulating staff health management would be of benefit. Further study could provide better information on how management could adapt the working environment to improve the wellbeing of staff.



Graph 6

Do you feel you have suffered from burnout or compassion fatigue?

The vast majority of participants in the survey felt they had experienced either burnout or compassion fatigue, with only 12% of respondents feeling that they had experienced neither. In a similar study of veterinary professionals, 54.8% felt they had experienced burn out (J. M. Cardwell MA, 2013). This suggests that there are areas of wildlife rehabilitation that need significant improvement. Areas that may benefit from improvement could be: more emotional support, more physical support and more organisation management support. This survey has identified that many of those working within wildlife centres feel they have experienced burn out or compassion fatigue. This suggests that there are failings from management to recognise the signs of staff struggling and to offer appropriate support. It could be argued that those employed within a wildlife centre should struggle with burn out less as they should be provided with a better work/life balance and more support. A limitation of this survey is that it does not determine whether those working within a wildlife centre are doing so on a voluntary or employed basis and does not look into the amount of time spent working per week. It may be beneficial to ask those working within wildlife centres, what percentage take care of wildlife outside the workplace; for example, taking orphans home to hand rear or caring for casualties taken to them personally.

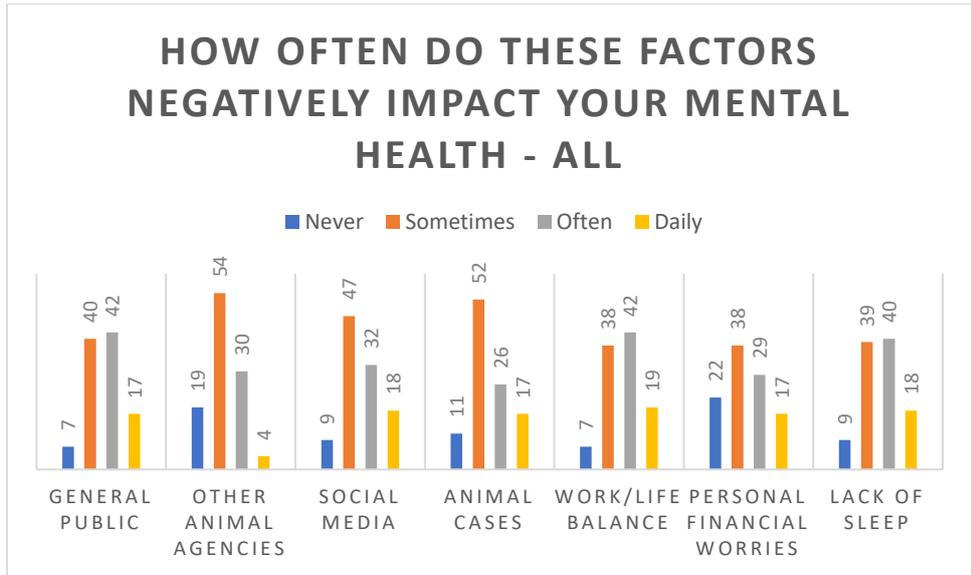


Graph 7

How often do these factors negatively impact your mental health?

Participants were asked to state how often they felt certain factors negatively impacted their mental health. These factors included: the general public, other animal agencies, social media, animal cases, their work/life balance, personal financial worries and lack of sleep. To establish which of these factors has the highest negative impact, responses were scored with a value of one to four, with never being awarded a one and daily being awarded a four. The overall number of points were compared to determine an order of impact. These have been displayed below the graph in table and list form for the three groups: all participants, those working within a wildlife centre and those working at home.

Participants were also given the opportunity to add in additional factors that they felt negatively impacted their mental health. A summary of these responses has been added below the graphs.

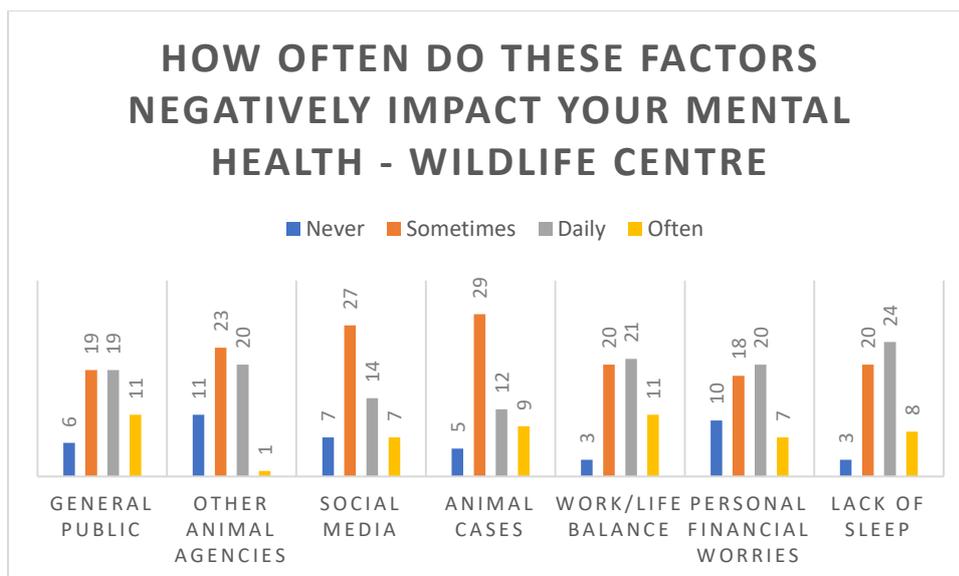


Graph 8

	Never <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Sometimes <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Often <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Daily <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Total <i>Weighted score</i>
General Public	7 (7)	40 (80)	42 (126)	17 (68)	281
Other Animal Agencies	19 (19)	54 (108)	30 (90)	4 (16)	233
Social Media	9 (9)	47 (94)	32 (96)	18 (72)	271
Animal Cases	11 (11)	52 (104)	26 (78)	17 (68)	261
Work/Life Balance	7 (7)	38 (76)	42 (126)	19 (76)	285
Personal Financial Worries	22 (22)	38 (76)	29 (87)	17 (68)	253
Lack of Sleep	9 (9)	39 (78)	40 (120)	18 (72)	279

Table 1

1. Lack of work/life balance HAS THE MOST NEGATIVE IMPACT
2. General public
3. Lack of sleep
4. Social media
5. Animal cases
6. Personal financial worries
7. Other animal agencies HAS THE LEAST NEGATIVE IMPACT



Graph 9

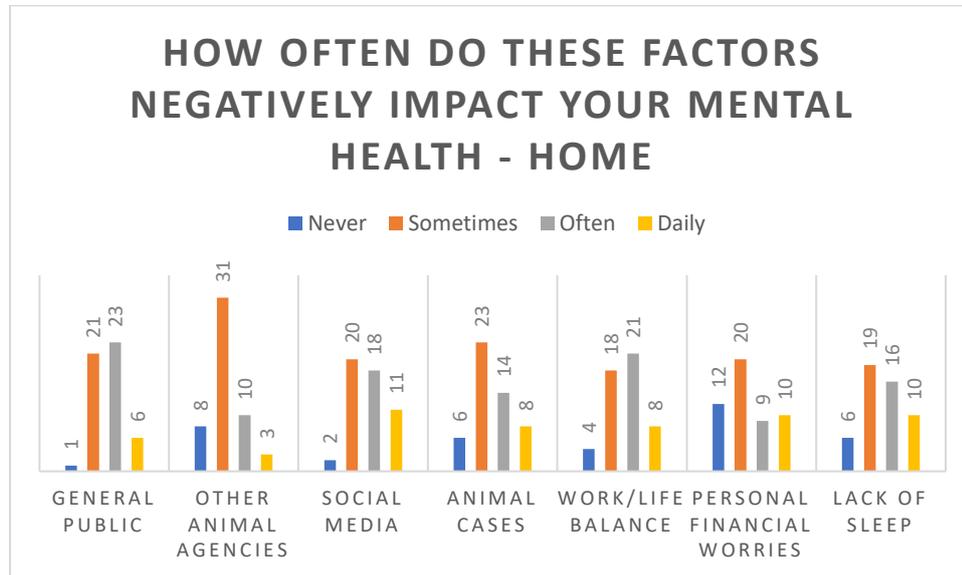
	Never <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Sometimes <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Often <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Daily <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Total <i>Weighted score</i>
General Public	6 (6)	19 (38)	19 (57)	11 (44)	148
Other Animal Agencies	11 (11)	23 (46)	20 (60)	1 (4)	121
Social Media	7 (7)	27 (54)	14 (42)	7 (28)	131
Animal Cases	5 (5)	29 (58)	12 (36)	9 (36)	135
Work/Life Balance	3 (3)	20 (40)	21 (63)	11 (44)	150
Personal Financial Worries	10 (10)	18 (36)	20 (60)	7 (28)	134
Lack of Sleep	3 (3)	20 (40)	24 (72)	8 (32)	147

Table 2

1. Lack of work/life balance HAS THE MOST NEGATIVE IMPACT
2. General public
3. Lack of sleep
4. Animal cases
5. Personal financial worries
6. Social media
7. Other animal agencies HAS THE LEAST NEGATIVE IMPACT

When given the opportunity to add their own thoughts, participants cited issues such as ‘bullying at work’, ‘lack of support within the team’, ‘a very toxic work environment’ and ‘being treated like a number by management’. This indicates that, in future data collection, it would be beneficial to add questions surrounding working conditions within wildlife rehabilitation centres. Participants also responded with ‘changes in procedures, although necessary, dictated by government agencies’, ‘other rehabbers and rehab centres being critical’ and ‘too much red tape, poor guidance and poor communication’.

28 people added additional comments, all with a similar theme to those above. Only one of the 28 responses did not add human related factors: whether that be management, other staff members or others in the industry.



Graph 10

	Never <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Sometimes <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Often <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Daily <i>No of mentions (weighted score)</i>	Total <i>Weighted score</i>
General Public	1 (1)	21 (42)	23 (69)	6 (24)	136
Other Animal Agencies	8 (8)	31 (62)	10 (30)	3 (12)	112
Social Media	2 (2)	20 (40)	18 (54)	11 (44)	140
Animal Cases	6 (6)	23 (46)	14 (42)	8 (32)	126
Work/Life Balance	4 (4)	18 (36)	21 (63)	8 (32)	135
Personal Financial Worries	12 (12)	20 (40)	9 (27)	10 (40)	119
Lack of Sleep	6 (6)	19 (38)	16 (48)	10 (40)	132

Table 3

1. Social media HAS THE MOST NEGATIVE IMPACT
2. General public
3. Lack of work/life balance
4. Lack of sleep
5. Animal cases
6. Social media + personal financial worries
7. Other animal agencies HAS THE LEAST NEGATIVE IMPACT

Participants added their additional thoughts on factors negatively impacting their mental health. Although many of these comments do fit into one or more of the brackets shown above, they provide us more insight into the specifics of the situation. 'How the wildlife community attack their own rather than support each other', 'other rescues critiquing or going out of their way to be

harmful' and 'other organisations refusing to work alongside each other' were some of a few comments referencing poor rehabilitator to rehabilitator relationships.

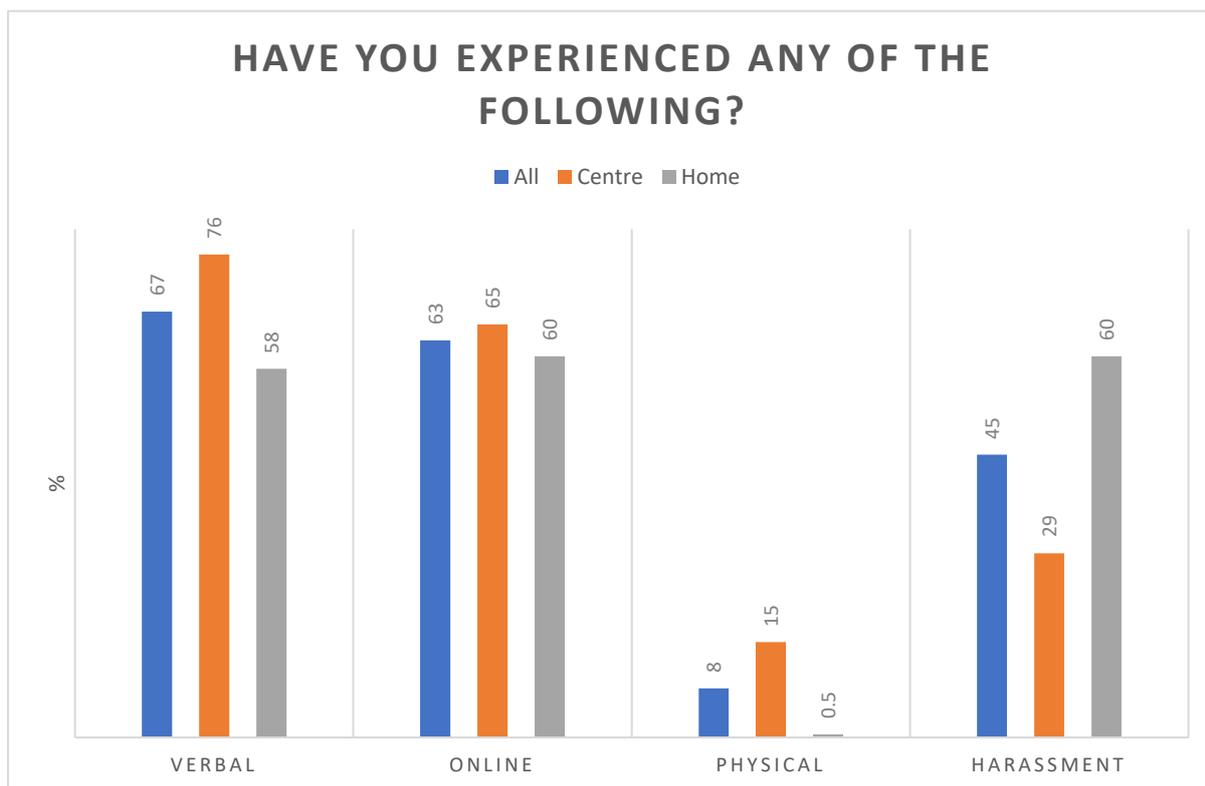
Home rehabilitators indicated that the general public had the second largest negative impact on their mental health. This was reinforced by some of the additional comments including 'people not respecting boundaries', 'people not understanding that I do this voluntarily' and 'pressured [or] guilt tripping me to take in when I say I am full'.

There appear to be stark differences in stress factors depending on whether an individual works within a wildlife centre or from home. It could be suggested that those working from home or running on a smaller scale will have more interaction with members of the public and are therefore more likely to have negative interactions, than those working in animal care in a wildlife centre. It would be worth, in future data collection, asking for more detail surrounding job roles of all individuals working within a wildlife centre and if they are likely to interact with the public. It could also be suggested that those running their rescues are more likely to experience the negative impact of social media as they are more likely to run their rescue's social media.

Both those working from home and those working within a centre seem to experience negative human interactions regularly. Those working within wildlife centres appear to come across issues with those also working within the centre, including management and colleagues, whereas those working from home appear to have more negative interactions with other rehabilitators. It could be suggested that lack of licencing and accountability could contribute to some of these negative interactions as people are unsure who is or isn't operating appropriately.

Have you experienced any of the following?

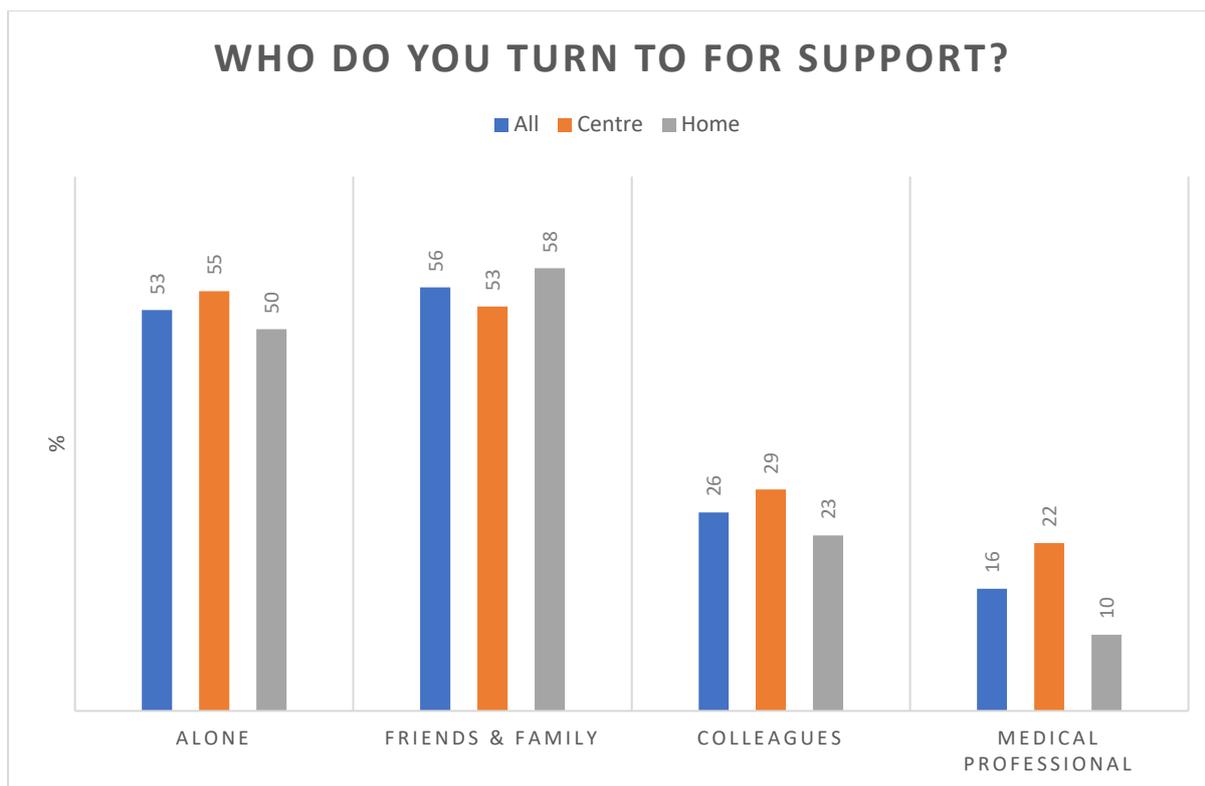
When participants were asked to add comments to areas that had a negative impact on their mental health, many stated that they had been subjected to unpleasant human interactions; both in the workplace and from members of the public and other organisations. Many of the participants had experienced both verbal abuse and abuse online. A smaller percentage of participants had experienced physical abuse. The treatment of sick, injured and orphaned wildlife can be a highly emotive subject with differing opinions being the main cause of conflict. 'Unreasonable expectations from [members of the public]', 'people within other groups who make it their mission to bad mouth our work' and 'big egos in the wildlife rehab industry [which is] detrimental to the staff and animals' were just some of the conflict-related comments added. Despite the question above showing that the general public have a more negative impact on participants mental health than others working within the industry or other animal agencies, it would be worth further investigation to determine where the above abuse originates: whether it is predominantly members of the public or others within the industry.



Graph 11

When you are struggling, where do you turn for support?

Overall, many people have support systems to turn to when they are struggling; however, 53% stated that they deal with their mental health alone. Some of those who selected 'deal with things on my own' also selected other support systems, which indicates that on some occasions they deal with things alone and on other occasions they seek help. A study conducted on healthcare staff showed that person-directed interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness groups or counselling and organisation-directed interventions such as educational interventions, work scheduling changes and teamwork training benefitted staff and improved overall mental wellbeing (Johnson, et al., 2018). Trialling this kind of therapies and support groups could have a similar impact on individuals working within wildlife rehabilitation. It could also work towards breaking down barriers between individuals in the industry.



Graph 12

Conclusion

Overall, the data gathered creates more questions than it answers. With 86% of respondents currently struggling; poor mental health, along with poor working conditions are currently a prominent issue within wildlife rehabilitation. There would be significant benefit in conducting further research into why this is the case and trialling different methods to try and minimise these negative situations. This could significantly improve the mental wellbeing of people working within the industry and potentially improve productivity, benefitting both the wildlife casualties and the wildlife rehabilitators. Another route for further investigation would be to determine the underlying causes for this situation and establishing protocols to improve the overall rehabilitator welfare. It would also be of benefit to investigate how supported individuals feel in several areas including: peer support, veterinary support, and financial support.

Further investigation is warranted surrounding the abuse that wildlife rehabilitators encounter both from members of the public and others working within the field. With 60% of home rehabilitators experiencing harassment and 63% of all rehabilitators experiencing online abuse, it would be beneficial to investigate how and when this occurs to enable individuals to put in place policies and boundaries to reduce the abuse.

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In collaboration with:

