

Leading ACT Experts at USU Awarded a \$2.25M CDC Grant to Support the Mental Health of Veterinary Students

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Second-year veterinary students participate in a diagnostic challenge simulation with a trained volunteer who is acting as a client. (Photo by Bronson Teichert.)

USU professors Michael Twohig and Michael Levin are co-investigators on a \$2.25M four-year study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. The collaborative project led by professors at Kent State University aims to bring training in ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) to students of veterinary medicine. ACT is a form of psychotherapy that uses acceptance, mindfulness, and values-based strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing. The study will repackaging this therapy tool into educational training.

“ACT helps individuals get unstuck from powerful thoughts and emotions,” explains Twohig. “When a person’s thoughts have less power over them, they are more able to engage in actions that are important to them. For people in veterinary medicine, they can struggle with frustration and burn-out. We help to decrease the impact of those feelings and help them be more successful in their work.”

Due in part to the high-stress and intense emotional environment in veterinary clinics and hospitals, suicide rates among veterinary professionals in the United States are three times the national average and 66% report a history of depression.

Twohig and Levin, professors in the Combined Clinical/Counseling Specialization in the Department of Psychology at Utah State, are recognized world leaders in ACT and support its investigation in many areas, including chronic health conditions, obsessive compulsive disorder, trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling), and delivering ACT via technology.



Professors Michael Twohig and Michael Levin

The professors merged their research labs about seven years ago to form the ACT Research Group, where they collaborate with researchers across the United States and the world to develop, research, and disseminate ACT interventions for a wide range of populations. Together with their team, which ranges from eight to 10 graduate students, they publish approximately one book and 25 papers annually.

In one of many outreach efforts, in 2018, Twohig provided a two-day training on ACT to the faculty and students at Kent State in Ohio where he met professors Mary Beth Spitznagel and Alanna Updegraff. Spitznagel had an interest in building an ACT training program for veterinary medicine with her colleague Updegraff, who is more clinically oriented. They approached Twohig and proposed the project. In 2020, the relationship resulted in a foundation grant for which Twohig consulted with Spitznagel and Updegraff in adapting ACT to address veterinary wellness. The team designed Unburdened, a program to reduce stress and burnout for professionals in the field of veterinary medicine. Levin subsequently joined the project using his expertise in delivering ACT through technology to collaborate in developing a self-guided online version of the program.

This latest grant expands upon Unburdened, bringing the program to veterinary students who will have access to the training via online modules. The most important aspect of the program is training students to respond to the challenging encounters they will inevitably have with clients. Spitznagel coined the behavior “burden transfer,” which occurs when the pet owner inadvertently transfers

the burden they feel (such as anxiety, grief, or frustration) to one or more members of the healthcare team.

“All those types of burdens that the caregiver is experiencing can go to the veterinarian team,” explains Levin. “They’re going to have these difficult moments, but how they respond will affect how it impacts them. Our goal is to address these problems early on and give students the tools to navigate challenging client interactions.”

The team at Kent State will recruit 200 veterinary medicine students from five institutions across the United States. Half of the participants will be working toward their certification as veterinary technicians and the other half will be working toward their Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree. Each student will receive a baseline mental health survey before they complete the three modules and will submit follow-up surveys five times over the coming year.

Each module will take about 30 minutes to complete. Twohig’s primary role in the project is to help develop the program using the evidence-based framework of ACT. Levin will translate the content into a self-guided format so students can access it outside of the classroom.

The online program, Unburdened for Students, will help students learn to identify burden transfer and develop hands-on ACT skills to use in the moment. The training will also give participants a step-by-step action plan tailored to the most common burden transfer situations.

“We’re going to compare students who get access to the training to students who don’t and evaluate whether the program has an additive benefit that improves mental health,” explains Levin.

“This is a really great example of how the ACT Research Group is partnering with another institution to help adapt and implement ACT for a targeted population that will benefit from these psychological skills,” says Levin. “We are hoping it can reduce mental health challenges and improve well-being and work satisfaction.”

Visit utahact.com to learn more about the ACT Research Group and ACT Guide, an online self-help program designed by Levin, Twohig, and their team at USU. The program fosters emotional wellbeing and helps individuals cope with mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and stress.