



A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS



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There are four sections in this document, each designed to collate the most up to date research within the veterinary context around a specific aspect of incivility:

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All content within this synthesis is derived from academic research with full details of citations provided via weblinks throughout the document.



SECTION 1: WHAT IS INCIVILITY?

In your job as a veterinary professional, you interact with a variety of individuals, including clients and colleagues. The literature found that some of these interactions can cause stress.



Studies on specific workplace stressors for veterinary professionals in the UK, US and France indicate various sources of stress including:

- Interactions with clients, for example, dealing with clients who are unable to pay, have unrealistic expectations, and make complaints.
- Interactions with co-workers such as experiencing confrontation and conflict.
- This type of research groups a range of workplace mistreatment behaviours together e.g., in the taxonomy of veterinary stressors, 'issues with clients' encompasses conflict, anger and negative feedback. These issues were linked with veterinarian burnout and suicidal ideation.
- Nevertheless, of these behaviours, one warrants particular attention as it can function as a workplace stressor – **rudeness or incivility**.

Incivility represents insensitive or disrespectful behaviours that violate workplace norms.



“It’s a broad range of things. I think it’s showing unwarranted, potentially offensive language, not being considerate or being polite when addressing you. Or anything that leaves you feeling like you’ve been disrespected potentially.”

According to a recent academic review, incivility is a reliable, valid, construct with impacts independent from other types of mistreatment (such as bullying or harassment). Incivility / rudeness can be distinguished from other workplace behaviours in the following ways:

- Incivility is **subtle** and often ignored at an organizational level.
- Incivility is **frequent** - 98% of employees will experience incivility at least once in their working lives and 50% weekly.
- Rudeness / incivility entails **low-level, non-physical acts** (e.g. scowling at somebody).
- The behaviour can be **ambiguous** in terms of intent to harm (e.g., not responding to someone in a meeting).

Incivility can be variable:

- Incivility can be expressed in two main forms: direct (e.g., unpleasant comments) and indirect (e.g., ignoring the person).
- Perception of incivility varies across individuals - what one person perceives as rude will not necessarily be considered rude by someone else.
- Consideration of incivility can also differ across contexts - e.g. a behaviour that is fine in the staff room might not be acceptable in a client consultation.

Our team of researchers wanted to learn about incivility specifically within the veterinary profession. They explored this via a series of research projects with veterinarian and veterinary nurse participants (including interviews and surveys).

Participants reported experiencing a variety of behaviours that they categorized as uncivil, ranging from clients yelling, to talking over the veterinarian, to making personal comments

SECTION 2: SOURCES OF INCIVILITY

- As with any front-facing industry, as a veterinary professional you are at risk of experiencing client incivility.
- Incivility within the veterinary context can also come from your co-workers.
- Sometimes the instigator of incivility can have a higher status than the victim, so you may experience senior colleague incivility.
- The impact of status on the incivility experience may be particularly applicable given the growth of veterinary practices, as teams become multifaceted.

Why does status matter?

- Social power, or where the instigator and target of incivility sit within the organisational hierarchy, has been suggested as a factor within the assessment of, and response to, uncivil behaviour.
- For example, targets of incivility who evaluate their status as higher than the instigator tend to react aggressively, whereas lower status victims may be more likely to withdraw.
- Therefore, it may be important where incivility comes from in how you respond to it and in how it impacts you



"I think the majority of them are genuinely just worried about their pet and they don't feel they are being... listened to or heard or their worries aren't being acknowledged'."



Causes of client incivility

- When an uncivil behaviour happens, individuals try to understand why it has occurred.
- If incivility is considered intentional, e.g., if the person is seen as generally rude or acting rudely on purpose, the negative impact is likely to be higher.
- If vice versa applies e.g., the uncivil behaviour was maybe caused by stress or low mood, this may lead to more positive appraisal and a more empathetic response.
- In other words, it is possible that the impact of, and your response to, client incivility will be dependent on what you perceive as the root cause of the behaviour.
- Vets told us that they attribute client incivility to various causes including financial concerns, stress, and worry, with reported responses guided by those perceptions.

- Veterinary staff told us that incivility from **clients, co-workers and senior colleagues** was experienced by, and had the potential to adversely impact, all veterinary staff.
- Nurses reported experiencing **significantly more incivility** from senior colleagues and co-workers than veterinarians.
- Incivility from clients tends to be perceived as more rude than similar behaviours from co-workers and senior colleagues.
- Incivility from clients is also associated with more feelings of frustration, upset and offense than similar behaviours from co-workers and senior colleagues.
- However it is important to recognise that all uncivil behaviour, regardless of source or initial perception, has the potential to adversely impact veterinary staff.

SECTION 3: INCIVILITY

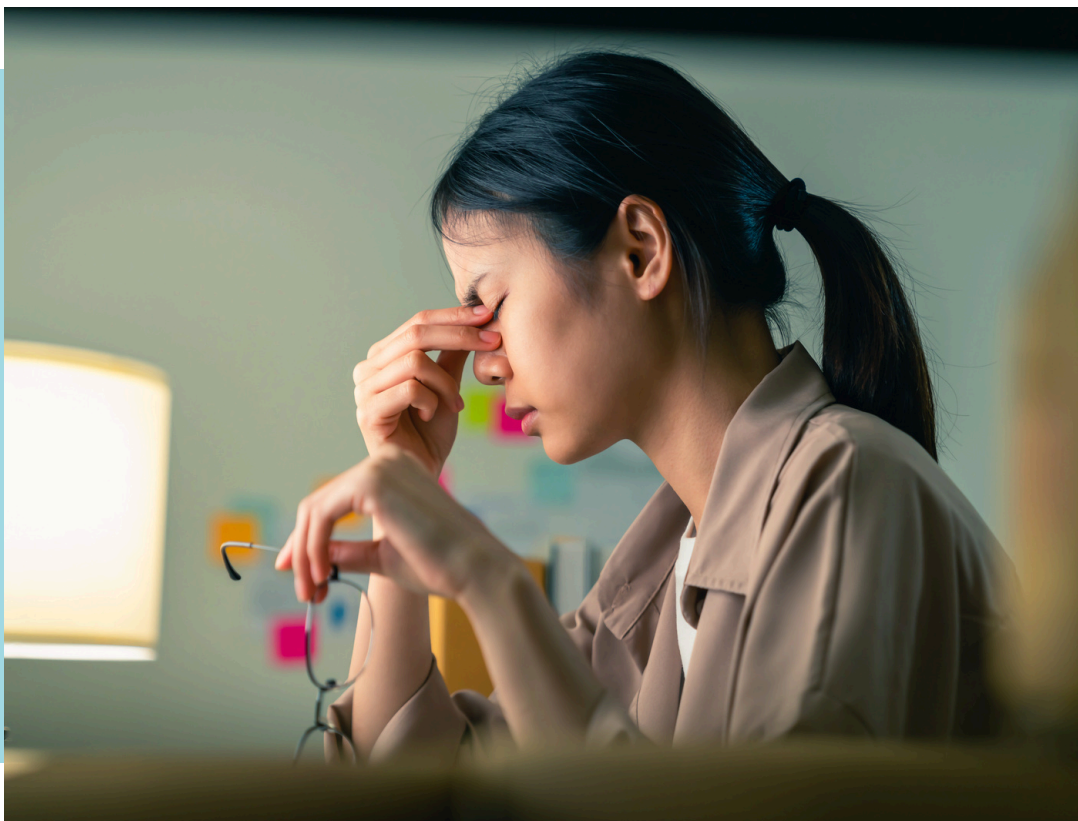
IMPACT

Research from various industries tells us that experiencing or witnessing incivility in the workplace can lead to:

- Employee burnout
- Increased quitting intention
- Adverse effects on wellbeing
- Increased stress levels
- Reduced performance at work

The type and severity of the impact is thought to depend on:

- Cognitive appraisal – the process through which you decide whether an uncivil interaction is important for your wellbeing e.g., you may dismiss minor behaviours if they do not affect your goals
- Causal attribution – the intent you see behind the behaviour e.g., you may think someone acted rudely because of low mood



Client incivility

UK vets told us that rudeness was particularly impactful when they felt the target was themselves or their clinical abilities. This was intertwined with their self-identity as a veterinary professional.

“People get really emotional and put all of that on you, and you try really hard, and what you think is helping them and [...] their pets and you’ve really dedicated your life to try and help [...] and it’s like [...] they’re attacking your identity.”



Others mentioned the adverse impact of such behaviours on their mental health, in the form of either heightened stress or a negative impact on their clinical confidence. They also felt that experiencing multiple episodes of rudeness could lead to them withdrawing from clients, either through reducing working hours, on-call commitments, or through a change in career options:

“It was an additional factor for why I went down the research route to pursue other career options because [...] to have to deal with awkward and rude clients it was just an additional thing I was just like ok yeah I don’t want to have to deal with people like this on a regular basis.”

Colleague incivility

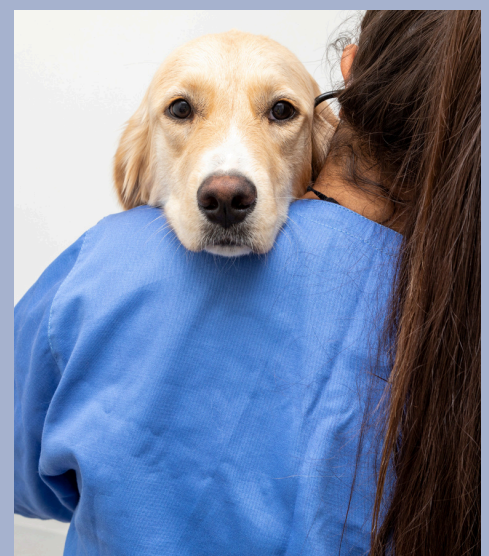
- Our research shows that incivility beyond that experienced from clients can also negatively impact veterinary staff mental health.
- The most impactful incivility from colleagues appeared to be that experienced from senior colleagues, linked with decreased job satisfaction and increased quitting intention.
- The impact of uncivil behaviour also varied according to the source of the incivility and the status of the target - Senior colleague incivility predicted turnover intention for veterinarians and job satisfaction for veterinary nurses.
- It is also important to note that it can be more difficult to escape incivility from colleagues, as opposed to clients. This can lead to rudeness feeling oppressive, which may contribute to a toxic work atmosphere.

WHY DOES INCIVILITY HAVE AN ADVERSE IMPACT?

Incivility is considered a workplace stressor and as such experiencing incivility prompts a biological response within the target based on 'flight or fight'. This means the target will experience an increase in adrenaline, heart and breathing rate. The target will also appraise the 'threat' by assessing the situation and deciding on the most appropriate response. This process, and the associated physiological reaction, are physically, cognitively and emotionally taxing leading to many of the reported impacts such as reduced well-being.

Specific impacts can also be understood via the following:

- **Vocational nature of veterinary work:** Veterinary staff are likely to consider their work as more than a job, and as such incivility (particularly that directed at work performance) is more likely to affect self-identity and confidence, especially for those who are highly committed to their work.
- **Emotional labour:** Not showing one's real emotions at work, can cause mental and physical fatigue. For example, providing 'service with a smile' and remaining calm or cheerful in front of uncivil clients is likely to be taxing, and could lead to emotional exhaustion.
- **Status challenge:** Incivility from colleagues may appear aimed at reducing the self-worth and confidence of the target. This can have a consequential impact on sense of achievement and job satisfaction.



SECTION 4: RESPONDING TO INCIVILITY

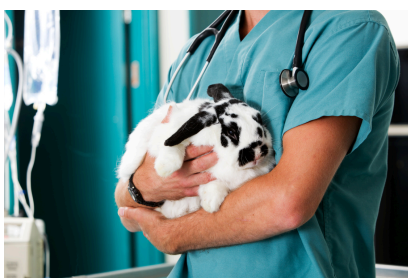
The biobehavioural model of incivility provides some useful categorisation of response options:

- Any uncivil act triggers an evaluation and a biological response from the victim.
- This biological reaction leads to one of four possible behavioural responses: reciprocation, retreat, relationship repair and recruitment of support.
- Reciprocation (e.g. respond with rudeness) and relationship repair (e.g. make a friendly gesture) involve trying to change the behaviour of the instigator.
- Retreat (e.g. exit situation) and recruitment of support (e.g. talking to friends / colleagues), conversely, encompass leaving the situation.
- Reciprocation and retreat decrease relationships and are likely to prolong the initial biological response (e.g., heightened adrenaline).
- Relationship repair and recruitment of support have the opposite effects, soothing the stress response and supporting relationship maintenance or development.



Our research with veterinary staff identified a variety of potential response options to incivility (each one is relevant for both client and co-worker incivility):

- **Problem solving:** "Try to solve the problem based on facts and plans which usually make the person a bit calmer as they start to think. Let them speak and wait till they finish if I have the time'.
- **Strategic defence via planning ahead to avoid or mitigate interactions:** 'I refuse to work with my head nurse without another member of staff present to reduce the outbursts and verbal attacks on me while in the back areas at work'
- **Re-engage person in interaction to complete task:** 'I would ask the client if s/he understands what I just said or ask them if they can show me how to dose this medication for their pet'.
- **Draw a line:** "I would give the client a verbal warning like 'I am not going to continue this conversation, I feel you are being rude, and this is borderline making me uncomfortable, I will terminate this conversation'.



- **'Empathy:** "Trying to let them know - I really understand why you're worried or, I see where you're coming from, I've checked that and this is why you don't need to be worried or, I've listened to you'.
- **'Seek practical support from colleagues:** 'I would ask a colleague to step in to observe the conversation and to help explain, if needed, the options'.
- **A supportive practice:** Support from co-workers and supervisors, as well as the practice as a whole. This can include aspects such as being able to discuss rude client interactions, receiving practical support through shared client management (e.g. taking over a consult from a colleague), and breaks (e.g. encouraging staff to take a tea break after an uncivil interaction).
- **Learning from the experience:** Discussing the interaction with colleagues to get their insights and experiences. Considering alternative methods of managing uncivil behaviours.

SELECTING YOUR RESPONSE



Your choice of coping response to incivility may depend on:

- **Your relative status.** Active strategies meant to change the behaviour of the instigator, such as confrontation and advocacy, carry with them a risk of retaliation from senior colleagues, or the organization. As such, lower status or more junior individuals, which may include veterinary nurses and care assistants, may be less likely to use these strategies.
- **Your causal attribution** i.e., the process through which you try to understand why a behaviour has occurred. For example, if you see a client's incivility as unintentional, perhaps because they are having a bad day, you may be more likely to respond in an empathetic way

- **The rudeness type.** Direct rudeness i.e., demeaning comments, is linked to a higher chance of the victim responding by being rude themselves, confronting the behaviour, exiting the situation, avoiding the instigator in the future, seeking support from friends and discussing the behaviour with a senior colleague. Indirect rudeness i.e., ignoring someone, was linked to a higher chance of a friendly response (e.g., a smile) or ignoring the behaviour.

It is important that you are comfortable with your chosen response, and feel it is appropriate for the situation, as well as the people involved.



SUMMARY



- Incivility is a low-level, frequently experienced behaviour that can be indirect (e.g. ignoring someone) or direct (e.g. making demeaning comments).
- Incivility may come from clients, co-workers or senior colleagues within veterinary practice.
- Incivility can have a range of adverse impacts including reduced job satisfaction, increased quitting intention, increased anxiety and increased risk of burnout.
- There are a variety of ways in which you can respond to incivility including problem solving, strategic defence, empathy, and confrontation.
- Incivility is an important workplace stressor within veterinary practice, and ideally all practices should work towards generating a supportive practice culture around uncivil behaviours including practical support, reflective practice and encouragement of self-care.



If you would like further information on the research discussed within this synthesis please contact:

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You can also find additional information on how to manage incivility in our guide: *'Keeping it civil: a practical guide to managing incivility in veterinary practice'*.