

FEARLESS

The Fear of Starting Over

You've built something remarkable.
You're allowed to want something different.

BY NATALIE L. MARKS, DVM, CVJ, CCFP, ELITE FFCP-V

This past winter, I sat on the floor of my dad's nearly empty dining room, helping him decide what to keep, donate, or throw away. He was 77. My mom — his wife of 53 years — had been gone for 56 days. She died of a highly aggressive butterfly glioblastoma so quickly that we barely had time to say goodbye. We were selling the house she had decorated, rehoming the dog they had raised together, and packing up to leave the town where he had grown up, gone to school, married her, raised me, and buried both of his parents. He was about to move into a new apartment in a new city, find new doctors, make new friends, learn to do laundry and cook dinner, and attempt to build a new life, none of which was his choice.

I'm writing this article for the veterinarian who feels the hard decisions bubbling up inside:

- The hospital owner in year 22, who built her practice from a single exam room and now can't picture handing the keys to a buyer, even though her body has been begging her to for two years
- The associate who has been quietly miserable for a year, scrolling job boards at midnight, terrified to disappoint the medical director who mentored her through her first parvo case
- The emergency clinician with two kids who knows one more overnight will break something that cannot be unbroken
- The specialist who trained for four extra years and now misses general practice
- The leader who needs to leave a board, partnership, marriage, or city
- The veterinarian eyeing a pivot into industry, biotech, AI, or consulting, who quietly worries that the white coat she earned will no longer count

This is for anyone standing at a threshold, frozen by the size of what they would have to walk away from. It's incredibly hard, and it's possible.



Tips for New Beginnings

My dad didn't have a roadmap. He had grief, a long list of unfamiliar tasks, and the quiet fear that the second half of his life would never feel like the first. What he has shown me are the same tips I now share with colleagues who reach out with the question, "What do I do next ... and is it enough?"

1 Recognize That Starting Over Isn't Starting From Zero

My dad walked into his new apartment carrying 53 years of love, decades of professional skill, the muscle memory of being a husband and a father, and family and friends who would catch him from a distance. We forget this in our profession. When you consider leaving a practice, a partnership, or a path you've outgrown, you aren't erasing the years behind you. You're crossing a bridge to the next chapter, bringing every patient, diagnosis, hard call, and relationship with you into whatever comes next. No version of your future doesn't benefit from your past.

2 Know That Grief and Possibility Can Coexist

My dad cried in that apartment. He also hung new pictures of the grandkids and learned where the closest grocery store was. The Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study found that

more than one in three veterinarians experience clinically significant psychological distress. The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association documented that female veterinarians die by suicide at rates substantially higher than those of the general population. Yet most of us keep showing up, loving the work, and finding meaning amid the exhaustion. You're allowed to grieve the version of your life you're leaving behind as you build the next one.

3 Name the Fear Out Loud

My dad sat on the phone one morning and said, "I don't know if I can do this alone." Saying it stripped the fear of half its power. We still treat doubt as a private failure in this profession. It's not. Tell a trusted friend, coach, therapist, or colleague exactly what scares you. If you're ready to move on, saying, "I think I need to leave," is not a betrayal of your team or your patients. It's the first honest data point for your next chapter.

4 Make One Micro but Irreversible Move

My dad sold the house before he signed a lease. That commitment forced everything else to organize around it. In our world, that might look like:

- Hiring a locum so you can take a week off

CONSIDERING A CHANGE?

You aren't alone. A 2024 study based on a survey of more than 1,200 small animal clinicians and published in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* found that 61% of respondents planned to decrease their clinical work, and 31% planned to stop clinical work entirely, within five years.



DR. NATALIE L. MARKS

The Fearless columnist is an educator, consultant, former Chicago practice owner, the chief veterinary officer at Mi:RNA, and the CEO of the Veterinary Angel Network for Entrepreneurs. As one of the original leaders within the Fear Free movement, she passionately believes in pursuing the best physical and emotional health of all patients.

- Scheduling the meeting with the recruiter you've been ignoring for six months
- Calling the SBA lender about the building you pass on your way to work
- Submitting the application for the veterinary innovation fellowship
- Booking the consultation with the practice broker, even if you swear you're "just gathering information"
- Having the difficult conversation you've been rehearsing in the shower for a year

Momentum follows commitment, not the other way around.

5 Build the Bench Before You Need It

My dad met his new neighbors before he grew lonely. We found his new internist before he got sick. Veterinarians often wait until we are already drowning before asking for help. Identify your people now. The infrastructure for a new life is built quietly, in advance.

6 Let the New You Be Smaller for a While

My dad cooked simple meals. He went to bed early. He didn't try to be the man he had been at 50. New chapters require energy, and energy is finite. The veterinarian who leaves clinical practice for industry will not redesign her kitchen in the same quarter. The owner who sells will not launch the consulting business in month one. Allow yourself to be a beginner while the next version of you finds its footing.

A Note for the Threshold

Six months have passed, and my dad has made new friends in his new building. He has a routine, a doctor he likes, a tiny balcony where he can sit and watch the sunset, and a grief that has softened into something he can carry. He isn't the man he was when my mother was alive. In some ways, he is more himself than he has ever been.

If you are standing at a threshold, afraid that starting over means losing everything you've built, understand this: You are not too late. You are not too tired. And you are not alone. The life you fear beginning is already quietly waiting for you. Take a breath, say it out loud, and take that next micro-step. **TVB**