



Above: Gemma Ives (left) and Anna Jennings (right)

## Riding for Rita

How two brave women are cycling the length of the UK to honour the memory of a colleague and to raise £5,000 to support others vets and nurses in need



Last year, Anna and Gemma lost a dear work colleague, Rita Mesquita (see above photo). Rita was a particularly gifted, respected and much loved, young veterinary surgeon, full of energy and passion.

Anna Jennings, 40, is a Director of Seadown Veterinary Services and Gemma Ives, 29, is a Veterinary Technical Advisor at Protexin Veterinary. They met and worked together at Seadown with Rita and all 3 forged a great relationship both inside and outside the practice.

In memory of their close friend, Rita and to raise awareness of the importance of managing our mental health, Anna and Gemma are embarking on a challenging bike ride in May to raise money for Vetlife <https://www.vetlife.org.uk/>. The charity that specialises in emotional, financial and mental health support for those working in the veterinary sector.

The World it seems is waking up to the importance of recognising mental health issues. One in four people in the general population will experience a mental health problem each year. By 2030, it is estimated that there will be approximately two million more adults in the UK with mental health problems than there were in 2013. Life in a veterinary practice in particular, is never easy. It's a hugely rewarding profession but it can be stressful. There is evidence of elevated psychological distress in the veterinary profession, with higher levels of anxiety and depression; suicide rates are about four times greater amongst veterinary professionals than in the general population. Last year, Vetlife alone responded to 2775 contacts on their helpline via phone and email.

With this bike ride, named #RideforRita for obvious reasons, Anna and Gemma will be taking on an enormous challenge, something that will need all their courage and strong minds and spirits, as well as general body fitness - they will be riding from Lands End to John O'Groats, a cycle ride that will take 14 days and will cover approximately 1,000 miles of heavily undulating country.

They will be entirely self funded because they are determined that all monies raised will go directly to Vetlife <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/RideForRita> but they will be also calling out to businesses for corporate donations and support.

*Anna takes up the story, 'I have always been a keen runner and completed several marathons, albeit before I added two small children into my life! They are now a bit more independent and I was looking for a new challenge. I haven't much previous experience of cycling and had not ridden a road bike until the end of last year. There is a lot to learn about technique and equipment and I have also realised that cycling uses very different muscles to running! Through the winter, I have been cycling at least twice a week, and have ended up buying a turbo trainer because the dark and the weather were seriously restricting training. However I am gradually increasing my mileage and gaining confidence and hope to be in reasonable shape by the time we get to May!'*



Above, left: Anna with husband Jonathan and children and right: Gemma with beloved dog, Percy

**Gemma continues their story:** *'Looking back, I had ups and downs throughout vet school but never allowed myself to acknowledge that it was anything more than feeling 'a bit stressed' – a veterinary degree is notoriously hard work, so of course I would expect to feel like that at times. After 5 years working in various practices, I still found myself feeling stressed, anxious and overwhelmed on a regular basis. Following a lot of self-analysis, CBT and speaking to a career coach, I made the big decision to move away from clinical veterinary work. I still get to use my veterinary degree and the parts of vetting that I do enjoy but I feel that I have my life back again, and am back to the old me.'*

*In regard to this new challenge, #RideforRita, I am trying to rack up my training miles by cycling at least 100 miles per week. To date, this has included cycles in the sleet, rain, wind and occasional sunshine (!), and some sweaty sessions inside on the turbo trainer! It's hard work but I know it will be worth it in the end. Hopefully we will succeed at raising a significant amount of money for VetLife, which I believe provides an invaluable service to the veterinary community. I rang VetLife several times when I was struggling; each time they provided a supportive and listening ear, and our conversations left me feeling calmer and more settled in myself.'*

**-ENDS-**

**NOTES TO EDITORS**

**Contact:** Ali Large for more information and images.

**E:** [ali.large@letstalkfresh.com](mailto:ali.large@letstalkfresh.com) **T:** 07966 446478