

Feeding the Fire

(Without Burning Out)

Managing compassion fatigue and
stress in animal welfare work

BY CARRIE ALLAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID POHL



It was a moment that Miguel Abi-Hassan will never forget:

“I was on a call to help a dog that was hit by a car, and I showed up and it was a sheltie,” he says. “And I’ve owned shelties all my life, and immediately I saw my dog on the side of the road, dead.”

Abi-Hassan, executive director of the Halifax Humane Society in Daytona Beach, Fla., who teaches workshops on stress management and compassion fatigue issues, says it was one of many moments that showed how much he and other animal welfare workers need to develop the emotional skills to survive.

“It really took me back and made me realize that what I need to take care of is me,” he says, “because if I don’t take care of myself, I’m not going to be around to take care of these animals.”

It makes sense, and yet ... animals need so much, and so many of them are suffering. And whether you work hands-on in the field or in the shelter, in your home as a foster caregiver, or in an office on policy issues that can help animals on a national level, what needs to be done can seem endless.

In a recent employee feedback session at The HSUS, staffers were asked to share ideas about how to make their work environment better. A huge sheet of paper was pinned to a wall, and employees sounded off about ongoing challenges, offering suggestions and commenting on each other’s thoughts.

In one spot, someone wrote: “People feel like they have to be on the job 24/7/365! There needs to be more work-life balance.” Next to that, someone had retorted: “Animal cruelty doesn’t end at 5 o’clock.” Others had chimed in on each side, drawing arrows and plus signs and saying, “Exactly!”

It’s a debate many animal welfare advocates have regularly, among each other and within themselves. The suffering we confront is so great it seems to demand all of our hearts. Yet if we give all of our hearts, what’s left of us to keep giving?

Advocates working for major societal change frequently wrestle with the implications of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl’s credo: *What is to give light must endure burning*. Many accept that sacrifice to a greater cause. But how can we keep our fires lit without burning out, take the time to refuel, and find the “kindling” we need to stay healthy?

In the standoff between *I-have-to-help-more-animals* and *I-need-some-space-to-breathe*, some people never figure out the answer. Some figure it out—and change jobs.

And some manage to find a balance that works.

A Field That Eats its Young

For those who have good coping skills, healthy boundaries, or natural resilience, animal welfare work can be stressful, but is usually manageable. But even the most mentally flexible folks can get overloaded. And for others, coping with endless animals and people in need, repeatedly bearing witness to their suffering, and knowing that not all of them can be helped can bring on compassion fatigue, a kind of secondary post-traumatic stress disorder caused by exposure to the pain of others. It’s a problem common among people who treat and respond to those who’ve been directly impacted by violence or other types of trauma—injuries, sickness, loss of home and family, all the things that shelter and rescue workers see daily in the animals they help.

When caregivers don’t give themselves enough care, it can threaten the work they pursue so passionately. One burned-out animal advocate who spent years trying to keep animals out of shelters so they wouldn’t be euthanized speaks of reaching a point where, to her horror, she just didn’t care



anymore. The situations that used to move her to action and generate her sympathy just made her feel angry, frustrated, and alienated.

In a field that, as some longtime shelter workers put it, tends to eat its young, the differences between people who thrive, people who survive, and people who crash are driven by a variety of factors. But there are practices that executives and managers can use to address the general negative stress experienced by those working to help animals.

In her book *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, author Laura van Dernoot Lipsky writes, "When I facilitate workshops on trauma stewardship, I rarely hear from participants that they work or volunteer in places that encourage them to take care of themselves, to pace themselves at a sustainable rate, or to maintain balance in their lives. Many of our fields and places of work seem to function, instead, from a place of tremendous urgency. This sense of urgency distracts many organizations from addressing how to best retain healthy, happy people who will continue to contribute to the betterment of the world."

When so much animal suffering is taking place, there's no question the work is urgent. But organizations that want to remain effective, experts say, need to educate management and staff about the effects of stress and put supportive measures in place. Doing so encourages people

to care for themselves, and provides a chance to create an environment where people can manage sometimes heart-breaking work without having it overwhelm them—and without succumbing to the toxicity that can consume organizations full of exhausted, burned-out individuals.

Ignore Your People, Fail at Your Mission

When agencies ignore the needs of staff, the effects of negative stress will eventually trickle into overall morale and job performance. The symptoms, sources say, include infighting among staff and volunteers; resistance to change; ongoing, long-lasting illnesses that never seem to resolve; high turnover; negativity; and lack of accountability.

Prior to starting compassion fatigue training sessions at the City of El Paso animal control facility, Sara Saucedo of the shelter's training and staff development program noted that across the board, staffers "were very hesitant to change. New procedures and policies would end up being better, but they were still against it. The morale was very low ... you could tell they had lost that spark." The primary drivers varied by job role and department, she says: Field officers' stress issues were more driven by their interactions with the public, but kennel staff had issues of their own.

At Edmonton Humane Society in Canada, executive director Stephanie McDonald says the behavior department staff "tends to cycle, because they're the ones who feel responsible for all the euthanasia ... even though they're not, and they're part of the whole process, it's what they feel. And you can't discount what people feel. I think that's the struggle that many managers go through: There's reality and there's perception, and perception really rules." Managers need to be aware that their staff's perception is their reality, and help keep it stable.

There may be variations in how compassion fatigue issues play out at shelters and animal care and control agencies, and how they play out at unsheltered rescue groups, says clinical psychologist Linda Harper. But, she notes, "I would say in all cases there's frustration, sadness, guilt in not being able to help all of them ... and I see the same type of infighting and stress and frustration being taken out on people, and little divisions and frustrations between them."

Harper has a theory about why that is: "We're so frustrated with the public and their lack of education that we expect so much from our fellow animal people. We can't believe it when they're not thinking what we're thinking."

Animal welfare folks see the worst side of people, Abi-Hassan acknowledges, and many of them come into the field with little preparation for the terrible things they'll witness. But if your work has you so exhausted and angry that you can't stand the sight of human beings, "you're going to have a hard time doing your job," he says. "Misanthropy makes teamwork impossible."

Committed managers need to understand how staff stress and overall morale will affect success, and make

changes accordingly. Think of it this way, suggests psychologist and professor Pat Comley: Animal welfare organizations are very focused on standards of care for the animals. But do they have standards of care for their staff?

Certified in compassion fatigue, trauma counseling, and conflict resolution, Comley has worked with people in a variety of caregiving professions. She's looked at the stress of those in nursing and social work; she's consulted on the issues of firefighters and teachers. But after years working with staff at animal shelters, she says that the kind of stress that comes out of animal welfare work is the most complicated she's ever seen, "because there are so many elements."

"There's the nonprofit factor. There's euthanizing. There's the animals, and everybody's relationship to animals ... There's dealing with the public. There's dealing with trauma-related issues, by people [who often have] backgrounds with a lot of trauma themselves, and how that triggers things." Add to that list the typically lower pay, and the fact that—unlike many helping positions—the public often fails to understand or respect what shelter staff and other animal welfare workers do, and it can be a perfect storm.

Different Stress for Different Folks

That perfect storm can hit even people who think they're ready for it. When Harper started doing consulting for the animal welfare field, she says, she was well-versed in

the effects of stress—she had actually written a book on the issue, *Give to Your Heart's Content ... Without Giving Yourself Away*. She was cautious about letting herself be overwhelmed. But as soon as she really got into the work and was fostering animals herself, "everything I believed in and I knew, I gave up—because I had to help that next animal," she says. "I didn't follow any of the things I believed in ... and I became depleted and sad, and had nightmares all the time, and would wake up at night thinking there was some animal I hadn't fed down in the basement."

She jokes that the experience changed her approach when presenting on compassion fatigue issues. "I had already been giving sessions at the No More Homeless Pets conference for a few years, and Faith [Maloney, one of the founders of Best Friends Animal Society] and I ... would stand up there and she would say, 'Hi, I'm the burnout specimen, and this is my friend Linda who shows us the way.' And then by 2007, I was well on my way, and we would say, 'Now we're both burnout specimens standing up here.'"

Burnout can happen to anyone. But it won't happen to everyone. Stress is a constant, but not everyone experiences it in the same way. Personality, work style, emotional history, and job duties all play a part in how people respond to stress.

When she came into animal welfare work after more than 20 years as an EMT, McDonald had long been aware

Rewarding Partnerships for Pet Adoptions



Each year, PetSmart Charities® works with Adoption Partners to find loving homes for more than 400,000 pets. Partner benefits include monetary rewards for every adoption that originates in a PetSmart® Store, and increased rewards during four nationally advertised adoption weekends.



Visit www.petsmartcharities.org/programs/adoption.php to learn how you can partner with us.

PETSMART
Charities

of the possible effects of trauma. “Post-traumatic and critical incident stress awareness was just part of our culture,” she says. And yet the need for self-care wasn’t always conveyed in ways that allowed workers to see themselves; if you recognize symptoms only when they reach extremes, you may miss the smaller warning signals that stress is affecting you. As McDonald notes, just because you’re not a drug addict or an alcoholic doesn’t mean you’re immune. “They told us we were supposed to be nuts, and some of us just had abilities where we weren’t nuts and had abilities to get through it.”

Some people, though, do seem to have an innate resilience—and researchers are not yet clear on why. So far, McDonald—who has responded to countless cruelty and hoarding situations and multiple major disasters, and usually works 70 to 80 hours a week—seems to be one of those. She’s happiest at work, happy to come through the doors in the morning.

Her own capacities on this front remain a mystery to her. She’s discussed it with Comley as they’ve worked together on compassion fatigue training, asking, “How come things can be going to hell in a handbasket, and I’m always OK?” she says. She has a glass of wine at night, and the next day she’s back at it, ready to do the work

and to help others do it. She’s grateful for her resilience, though she doesn’t understand it. But, she says, “The good news is that we can teach skills that seem to come innately for some people.”

Inevitable, But Manageable

These days, awareness of compassion fatigue issues is higher, and there are plenty of resources out there—surveys, workshops, techniques that can help organizations support their people (see the Resources box at right for a small selection of these).

But most sources emphasize that treating stress on a piecemeal basis, reacting and holding workshops only when problems arise, is less effective. What’s needed is an approach that assumes that stress is a constant factor and may ebb and flow in cycles, that everyone will cope with it differently, and that receptivity and openness to staff needs is key.

“I see stressors coming from everything from the way a case is prosecuted to the way an intake happened or the way a return happened or the way a customer dealt with one of our managers,” says Abi-Hassan. “It’s not about fixing it; it’s about understanding it. There’s only so much you can do to fix it.”



As long as you understand the triggers and the stimulus that animal welfare workers in all their functions are dealing with every day, he says, you can prepare for many of the issues that will arise. He notes that some of the most useful workshops he's done to help staff cope with stress aren't even specific to animal welfare issues, but classes to help with basic time and money management—stresses that are common to most working people.

At Edmonton Humane Society, McDonald has created a top-down approach that involves everything from proactive planning for stressful events to surveying staff about their personal styles of communication and making those styles known to other workers, a system that helps reduce staff tensions. She's brought in the rescue groups the shelter works with as well as animal control, trying to make sure the whole culture is saturated with good information. "We didn't want a Band-Aid approach," she says.

Having that awareness in place has helped, she says, and accepting the reality of stress allows the organization to plan ahead. She cites kitten season as an example: "I know that's going to affect everybody mentally." So this year managers met with staff and acknowledged that even with all Edmonton does with education and spay/neuter, the shelter would still take in thousands of kittens, and staff would have to deal with that. And then they explained, specifically, how they were going to deal with it: a specific number of cat adoption events to cope with the influx they knew would come. In doing so, they staved off the reactive panic that often hits shelters when the kittens and cats start arriving in droves, and staff stress levels spike while planning spur-of-the-moment events to deal with it.

"I think they feel that we're taking control and that we're not reacting," says McDonald. "And this year we haven't seen the staff crying about all the babies coming in."

Practicing People Care

Comley says that shelter managers need to pay attention; if someone hasn't taken a day off in a long time and clearly needs one, make them take it. "Know the right questions to ask. With 'How are you today?', you get the word 'fine.' But if you instead say, 'On a 1-10 scale, how are you doing?' and they say 'Three,' well then, 'OK, let's talk.'"

During workshops or one-on-one chats, managers will need to make sure staff feel safe to express their feelings about what they're dealing with. When Saucedo first started talking about compassion fatigue issues with shelter staff, "I was very nervous about how it would go," she says. "But once you got them in there in the small group and I opened the can of worms, they really let me have it. ... I think they were surprised, like, 'Oh, somebody really cares about us, and they want to help,' so they took advantage of that."

Resources

- Watch future issues of *Animal Sheltering* for tips on managing compassion fatigue from Lauren Glickman of Foray Consulting (forayconsulting.com).
- Check out resources and research from Dr. Patricia Comley at patcomley.com.
- Dr. Linda Harper can be reached through her website, harperhelper.com.
- Access a stress management webinar taught by Miguel Abi-Hassan and hosted by PetSmart Charities at bit.ly/Rqinug.
- Check out "A Return to Heart Health," a webinar by Wendy Warner and Brad Hubbell, at heartmath.com/health-professionals/health-professionals-speaker-series.html.
- Order Laura van Dernoot Lipsky's book and learn more about her work at the website of the Trauma Stewardship Institute (traumastewardship.com).

Saucedo's agency has just started having ongoing staff meetings about stress, and she hopes to continue. She also envisions creating a space within the shelter—ideally a peaceful garden area—where staff can go to find an oasis of calm when the work gets to be too much. "Somewhere there's no PA system calling them to go get a dog, no meowing, no barking in the background, no smells ... where they can use their break time and go in and relax and reflect."

Such a quiet space to recoup, gather strength, and get your head together can be invaluable to staff caught up in the daily rush of sheltering work. It's a small thing, but so necessary, says Harper. "Stress and burnout, and our struggles with it, are inevitable," she says. "The same passion that drives us is what's going to disillusion us. The hands-on work that gives us satisfaction is going to exhaust us. Every last one of us has to become aware of this and take significant action to not have that happen. If we simply follow our natural heart's desires, we're going to end up over our heads, because there's too much to do, there are too many to help, and it's too hard to say no."

But she says that practicing proper self-care can empower people to work better and work happier. "When we're at our best, we're able to receive all these incredible, wonderful gifts that are part of this journey, because there's nothing like what animals give to us," she says. "Once we're at our best, we're more able to receive the gifts that will keep us going." ■



Registration
Opens in
December!

Get in Tune with Your Profession!

Animal Care EXPO 2013 // May 8–11, 2013

Gaylord Opryland Resort

Nashville, Tennessee

Join us in Music City for Animal Care Expo, the largest and most affordable international training conference and trade show for staff and volunteers involved in animal care, control, sheltering, rescue, and emergency services. Our 2013 schedule includes nine intensive tracks on cats, field services, fundraising and money management, leadership, shelter operations, implementing a Pets for Life program, and more!

This year's conference will also provide new networking opportunities with attendees from animal welfare agencies and shelters across the globe.

Plan now to join us for Animal Care Expo 2013! We promise, we won't make you line dance.

For more information, visit animalsheltering.org/expo or call 1-800-248-EXPO.



Presents

**ANIMAL
CARE EXPO**