



People Care Starts With You

Surviving animal welfare work demands balance and inner strength
BY CARREEN MALONEY

Penny Cistaro hears a flurry of anger when she conducts her compassion fatigue seminars for animal shelter workers.

In an open forum where communication is encouraged, participants with bottled-up pain have the chance to unburden themselves. They tell Cistaro and the other participants about their experiences in the shelter, and the feelings they inspire.

Cistaro, who was recently hired to head up the City of Sacramento's Animal Care Services Department, has been conducting these seminars for a while, and the stories she hears are so similar and abundant that they often blur together.

Occasionally, though, a story reveals someone facing a serious crisis. Recently, one shelter worker stood out by revealing her pure, unadulterated rage. She told the class that her thoughts darken when citizens dump animals at the intake desk. She fantasized about them driving out of her shelter parking lot only to suffer a horrible death in a terrifying car crash. The animals in her shelter were scared, so she wanted the people who relinquished them to experience terror, too.

She was clearly a dedicated animal lover, so at first blush, Cistaro's advice to her might sound harsh: Get out of the business, or take a long break—and don't come back until you've had a serious attitude adjustment.

Cistaro has been in the sheltering field for a long time, long enough to recognize that it will always bring

moments of righteous anger and heartbreak. What can be altered is how people respond to those moments.

"The only thing that will change is them—their anger, their approach," says Cistaro, a nationally recognized shelter management and euthanasia expert. "They have to do something with all that anger. If you want to work for animals, you have to work with people."

A Two-Way Street

It's a frustrating situation: In order to get animals adopted, shelter workers have to be friendly and warm to the people who visit their facilities. But the words and behavior of citizens coming to the shelter don't always inspire friendliness and warmth.

For shelters and rescue groups aiming to save lives, competent customer service is critically important (see "At Their Service ... with a Smile," p. 35).

But people care doesn't end with customers—in fact, it doesn't even start there. People care begins with shelter staff and volunteers. Each individual has to take personal responsibility. There's a reason that flight crews tell passengers to make sure their own air masks are in place before attempting to assist others with theirs. If someone is already suffering, tense and angry all the time, struggling for emotional "oxygen," it's difficult to treat others with empathy.

Cistaro knows that all too well. "There are days when the pain brings me to my knees," the 35-year



Penny Cistaro, recently hired to head up the City of Sacramento's Animal Care Services Department, helps Miracle strike a pose for a shelter calendar. Miracle was rescued from a hoarder house.

shelter veteran says. "When I first started as a 20-year-old kid, I was angry all the time. It was wasted energy."

Rage is one of the markers of compassion fatigue, a mental disorder with a cluster of symptoms mimicking post-traumatic stress disorder. It seizes hold of people whose personalities are characterized by empathy and a deep awareness of the suffering of others; people driven to relieve their subjects' emotional and physical pain to the point of their own exhaustion. When physical and mental exhaustion is combined with stress, a feeling that goals aren't being met, and an inability to cope, burnout sets in.

Those at high risk are most commonly found in helping professions—doctors, nurses, missionaries, police officers. And animal shelter workers, of course.

But shelter workers experience a stressor the other groups don't have to confront. They are sometimes asked to end the lives of the very creatures they have saved and nurtured, adding an extra layer of inner conflict, guilt, and pain.

Frequently, the public doesn't make the work any easier. Those turned down for adoptions may lash out at adoption staff. Those whose animals are seized due to abuse or neglect may lash out at humane officers. Those surrendering animals may want guarantees they'll be placed, and may become abusive when surrender staff is unable to provide them. And even within the animal welfare movement, some critics pile abuse on the heads of shelter workers, implying that they enjoy killing—or are simply too lazy or incompetent to prevent it.

It's little wonder that the stress can reach a boiling point.

Classic symptoms of compassion fatigue include crying spells, irritability, loss of hope, and withdrawal from social activities. Destructive self-soothing behaviors and substance abuse are sometimes employed in

Carol Reichert, executive director at the Richmond Animal Protection Society in British Columbia, enjoys a tender moment with one of her charges.

a futile attempt to dull the pain. Sleep compromised by nightmares or interrupted by insomnia is typical.

In the most extreme cases, rescuers might grow tempted to take their own lives. Most rescuers know people in the field who have committed suicide.

"You see people who are the sweetest, most compassionate, balanced, understanding people in the world, and as the stress piles on, they snap," says Shelly Patton, facility and information technology manager for Louisiana SPCA.

The research backs up Patton's observations. An HSUS-funded study ("The Caring-Killing Paradox," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 2005) led by researchers Charlie Reeve and Steven Rogelberg suggested that animal care workers, in particular those who perform euthanasia, "are at increased risk of emotional mismanagement, physical ailments such as high blood pressure and ulcers, unresolved grief, depression, as well as substance abuse and even suicide." While euthanasia takes its toll on everyone working at a shelter, those who actually perform the act were reported to have significantly higher levels of work stress and somatic complaints, and lower levels of job satisfaction.

Treatments, but No Cure

Unfortunately, while there are coping strategies that can ease the pain, there isn't a panacea. Hilary Hager, shelter activities coordinator at Everett Animal Services in Washington state, first took courses on compassion fatigue about five years ago. When she brought back the information she had gleaned to fellow staff members at her shelter, they were disappointed.

“Everybody wants there to be a magic bullet, a formula, so they won’t be in so much pain anymore,” says Hager, who now conducts compassion fatigue classes through The HSUS.

Hager says shelter workers need to view themselves as a tiny drop eroding a big problem a little bit at a time, and let go of the notion that the responsibility for fixing the problem is theirs to bear alone. “You are a drop of water on the boulder, and if enough drops of water hit the boulder, it changes the rock. Understand that you are part of the process.”

But when the body count mounts, coping with shelter life can consume and overwhelm the caregivers.

“I’ve cried. I’m like, ‘I don’t want to euthanize another one,’” says veterinarian Erika Anseeuw, director of animal health at Winnipeg Humane Society in Manitoba, Canada. “When the numbers get really bad, everybody’s affected.”

She quotes a Pink Floyd song that sums up her disposition: “The rusty wire that holds the cork that keeps the anger in.”

For many shelter staffers, the anger inside that bottle is hard to pour out. Family and friends aren’t always equipped to offer support they crave, the outlet required to release enough stress so the caregiver can face another day. Uninitiated listeners might clap their hands over their ears, or grimace when a painful or graphic story is presented, and cut the conversation short.

Given how few people seem to understand what shelter workers go through, the urge to isolate and stop socializing is a common response. But finding a friend or colleague to talk with on the bad days is a vital step toward warding off compassion fatigue. Cistaro has a buddy in the field she calls upon when she’s distraught—Kim Intino, director of the Shelter Services program for The HSUS.

Most recently, Cistaro reached out to Intino after a hoarding case in which she had to chase 35 sick cats around the house to capture them. Rooting them out of their hiding places, she says, “I felt guilty. I felt like I was torturing those animals.”

Intino says the mutual support she and Cistaro give each other isn’t quite a therapy session—more of a post-mortem, a check and balance on the choices they have made in the field.

“I listen to her and support her feelings,” Intino says. “I give her an honest opinion. I’m not afraid to disagree. A friend will tell you the truth.”

Intino and Cistaro have worked on several stressful cases together, the most high-profile one being a large, multijurisdictional animal shelter in 2007. Cistaro and Intino were part of a six-member HSUS team called in to evaluate the facility. A disease outbreak of dire proportions had sickened the population, and shelter staff had to euthanize 1,000 animals within a matter of days.



“Here we are, crusty people who have been doing shelter evaluations for a long time, and we were still affected,” Intino says. “The pain lasted for a long time.”

As team leader, Intino kept her composure throughout the week, and didn’t cry, even in her hotel room at night. But when she stepped on the elevator to leave the site, the tears flooded over. For the next several days, she suffered from exhaustion and fever, and realized this was her body’s reaction to compassion fatigue.

Professional Help That Helps

It’s often people in the field who are the best equipped to empathize and help other shelter workers in crisis. Surprisingly, even trained mental health professionals aren’t always prepared to provide a safe and supportive audience for traumatized rescuers. According to dozens of shelter workers interviewed, their stories of animal neglect and cruelty sometimes made therapists squeamish and uncomfortable; the professionals were not always prepared for the emotional specifics involved in animal sheltering.

One psychologist told this writer that he was “vicariously traumatized” when animal issues such as euthanasia were discussed. Or there’s the opposite shortcoming—counselors who aren’t sympathetic enough because they don’t fully grasp the magnitude of the human-animal bond, and the depth of pain suffered by shelter staff.

But there are mental health professionals who have come to specialize in animal welfare stresses.

Erika Anseeuw, D.V.M., director of animal health at the Winnipeg Humane Society in Manitoba, Canada, works hard to keep her emotions in check. But on some days, the heartache can be hard to take.



Consider Yourself

Self-care is vital to your health and vigor, both mental and physical. Here are some suggestions to help you stay balanced and healthy:

- **Avoid snacks loaded with processed sugar and fat. Opt for healthy foods like fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole grains.**
- **Take a 10-minute break if you feel angry or overwhelmed. Do some stretches or relax with breathing exercises. Try visualizing your happy place.**
- **Make time for exercise. It's a powerful stress-buster, releasing endorphins while keeping you in rescue-ready shape.**
- **Let nature take its course for you. Take a walk. Sniff the flowers and look up at the sky. Wiggle your toes in the grass. The wonders of nature can brighten a foul mood.**
- **A beer with shelter buddies after a bad day can be therapeutic in its own way. But abusing alcohol and other mood-altering substances should be avoided; in the long run, it will only depress you further.**
- **Seek out a safe person to call if your feelings of loss and hopelessness grow too intense for you to handle. A trusted colleague, friend, or professional can defuse your despair and leave you feeling less alone.**

In San Francisco, one seasoned pet loss counselor has become a beacon for the animal rescue community. Betty Carmack is the author of *Grieving the Death of a Pet*, and her pet loss support group has been getting rave reviews at the SPCA for nearly 30 years. Among shelter people, her work has attracted a devout following. San Francisco Animal Care and Control's deputy director Kat Brown reports that she's stopped referring staff needing help to the employee assistance program. Those therapists weren't tuned in to the grief inherent in animal welfare work. Instead, she suggests they see Carmack.

Mainstream mental health professionals "don't always understand how real these emotions are to people," says Carmack. "The loss is minimized because it's not a human being."

So what is Carmack's secret to understanding what animal rescuers go through? Her deep love and respect for animals is part of her magnetism. And then there's her gritty approach; she considers ministering to this sector of society to be her personal mission. Carmack, a registered nurse who recently retired as a professor of nursing at University of San Francisco, has gone into the euthanasia room to witness animals' final moments. She has absorbed the emotions of the people whose role it is to end their lives.

"I was given that opportunity when I first started out—I was invited to go in," Carmack says. "Some counselors have never been given the opportunity to

truly experience the depth of the emotions that shelter workers have to deal with."

While the process is typically peaceful, Carmack's also witnessed what happens when euthanasia doesn't go smoothly.

"People won't even listen to their stories, much less go see it," says Carmack. "It's one thing for me to hear about it. It's another thing for me to witness the animals fighting to go down, and hear their cries. And see what these people go through. How can I truly grasp the internal conflict people have if I'm not willing to see that myself?"

These life-and-death decisions inevitably foster a highly charged work atmosphere. Shelters are emotional—even combustible—environments. The bad days hum with tension.

Honoring Feelings, Providing Space

Given the emotional nature of the work, reducing that tension is tricky. A healthy, high-functioning team doesn't create itself.

Sources interviewed for this story agreed on several elements that must be in place to improve a poisonous environment. First, change must come from the top. Staff at management and lower levels agreed on this: Without a strong, compassionate and capable leader, an otherwise talented group of people might not be able to work effectively and happily together.

In a follow-up Reeve-Rogelberg study about animal welfare workers ("What shelters can do about euthanasia-related stress," *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, September 2007), support from management was the most common suggestion offered by those asked how their stress could be reduced. People who perform euthanasia wanted managers to ask about their well-being and care about the answers. And they wanted their bosses to ensure that they were being supported by others in the shelter who didn't euthanize—not criticized and attacked for doing a job that's tough enough as it is.

Hager suggests grief among staff might be reduced if organizational policy allows for the personal attachments workers have to particular animals—up to a point. Euthanasia decisions will always be emotional, and while policies must reflect the shelter's space and placement realities, "there should be space for staff, that if they have a really strong connection with that animal, that they be given time to work on it. Give them two days to figure this out," Hager says.

At the Richmond Animal Protection Society in British Columbia, executive director Carol Reichert's chipper team seems to work together effortlessly. Part of that might be because the shelter rarely euthanizes—and staff opinions are always considered when animals are euthanized.

Reichert's attitude also sets an example, because she is almost always bright and positive. "It rubs off on other people," Reichert says. "I never feel stressed because this is what I love doing."

For the staff directly involved in euthanasia, having the confidence that they have the proper training, equipment, and euthanasia drugs to make the process as painless and humane as possible can go a long way toward reducing stress. And at shelters where staff must wear different hats, those who euthanize in addition to other duties need to be given space and time to perform. For example, a euthanasia technician who doubles as an animal control officer shouldn't be rushed out on field calls until euthanasia duties are complete.

"If you try to rush, it's not going to go well," Cistaro says.

Regardless of their roles, staff should be instructed about self-care and be encouraged to pursue activities outside their work at the shelter. An organization that supports its employees' human needs for time with family and friends and time to pursue hobbies, sports, and creative activities will help detoxify the atmosphere. Shelter staff needs space to breathe and decompress.

For some, symbolism soothes the pain. Winnipeg Humane Society once had a memorial service at the shelter to honor the euthanized animals. A number of employees and volunteers attended, and declared it a healing exercise. But managers need to accept that not everyone will embrace these gestures. At WHS, some staff members didn't want to expose their pain in a group setting, and preferred to grieve privately. For example, veterinarian Erika Anseeuw refused to attend the WHS service.

"For those of us who actually do it, we were like, there's no way I'm picking that scab," Anseeuw says. "Because I've got it neatly tucked away where I can deal with it. I don't want to go feel this again in front of a bunch of people."

Small gestures by management can also cultivate good cheer. Notes of appreciation, pizza nights, even a kind word in passing can help, says Green Cross field trauma specialist Mary Schoenfeldt, who has seen her



share of burned-out rescuers. Following Hurricane Katrina, Schoenfeldt was on the scene at the Lamar-Dixon temporary sheltering facility, attending as a mental health counselor.

"I saw people get caught up in minutiae," Schoenfeldt says. "People got very burned out. The work was intense and emotional because we're dealing with helpless creatures. People were so filled up with intensity that any little thing caused their eyes to well. They were frustrated and looking for a place to put that frustration."

Schoenfeldt's approach to get someone to open up and start talking in the sweltering Louisiana heat was brilliantly simple—she'd hand her target an ice-cold bottle of water. The simple gesture was often enough to get people talking.

Once a team bonds and starts working well together, its members will often provide their own antidotes to stress by turning to each other during difficult times. When no one else understands the emotional ups and downs of shelter life, they can relate. Staff debriefing sessions release a pressure valve; workers review traumatic events, and are encouraged to discuss feelings and frustrations.

In the end, it's the animals who provide the best rewards. Finding a balance that allows saving as many as possible while preserving your own health and sanity is the key to long-term survival in the field.

"You toughen up," Reichert says. "You make a decision. If you don't get a grip, you can't do this work. I consider myself the most blessed person. I'm the luckiest person on Earth to be able to meet all these little animals." AS

Carreen Maloney has been a writer and an animal rescuer for 20 years. She lives in Washington state. This story was updated from her website devoted to humane education, which can be found at fuzzytown.com.

Compassion fatigue most often affects people whose personalities are characterized by empathy and a deep awareness of the suffering of others. Here, HSUS Emergency Services team member Rowdy Shaw comforts a dog removed from a hoarding situation.

Resources

Humane Society University offers courses on coping with compassion fatigue (humanesocietyu.org).

■ *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community*, a book detailing the causes and treatments for shelter and rescue workers suffering from stress, is available for purchase at animalsheltering.org/publications.