



Assessing Stress: Animal workers and the emotional toll of euthanasia

The phrase “compassion fatigue” is now commonplace in the animal sheltering lexicon. Some might even call its arrival long overdue, given the emotional demands of a profession in which euthanasia, animal cruelty cases, and difficult interactions with the public are daily events.

But what variables enable certain people to remain in the field for years while others burn out quickly? A recent study (*Society & Animals*, Vol. 13, No. 3) by Australian researchers sought to answer this question by assessing risk factors for “perpetration-induced traumatic stress” (PITS) among people who euthanize animals. Similar to post-traumatic stress, PITS afflicts those who are not just exposed to disturbing events but also actively participate in them.

Researchers recruited 150 subjects from animal shelters, veterinary clinics, and laboratories, all of whom had been involved in euthanasia through their workplace. The mean age was 30.6 years old, and 80 percent of the participants were female. About 70 percent of the participants indicated that an affinity for animals had influenced their choice of occupation, and nearly half identified euthanasia as being one of the worst aspects of their jobs. Although none of the respondents reported euthanasia-associated traumatic stress symptoms in the severe range, 11 percent reported moderate symptoms and 39 percent reported mild symptoms.

Not surprisingly, participants who indicated higher levels of satisfaction

with social support reported less stress than those with less satisfactory social support. In an interesting twist, the highest perceived level of social support was attributed to pets while the lowest level was associated with employers. Researchers also found a significant positive correlation between traumatic stress scores and concern for animal death.

Perhaps less intuitive was the finding that the mean level of stress did not vary by occupation, even though the reasons for euthanasia varied considerably, with veterinary staff usually performing euthanasia because of sickness or age and shelter staff often euthanizing for behavioral reasons and “unwanted” status. Stress did vary across gender, however, with women reporting more stress than their male counterparts.

The good news for shelter workers eager to make a career out of their passion for animals is that those with more years of experience reported fewer traumatic stress symptoms. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that exposure to stress fosters coping mechanisms (as opposed to the theory that stress is cumulative). What remains to be studied is whether long careers with animals actually inoculate people against euthanasia-related stress or whether this group of workers is self-selecting. Either way, such research offers the promise of more effective stress prevention and reduction strategies so that PITS doesn't become the last word.

—Hillary Twining

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