

Dealing with Death

Study identifies coping strategies for staff stress related to euthanasia

BY JIM BAKER

Vent your feelings. Alter your emotional attachment level. Know that euthanasia is sometimes the best option.

In a survey of animal shelter employees from 62 shelters in the United States, these are among the many coping strategies that euthanasia technicians recommend for dealing with euthanasia-related strain.

The survey, recently published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)*, sought to identify and evaluate coping strategies advocated by experienced shelter workers who directly participate in euthanasia. Experts from The Humane Society of the United States helped the authors identify 88 shelters across the country where euthanasia is performed; staff at 62 shelters agreed to participate in the survey.



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The survey asked: "What recommendations would you give to someone who is just starting out in this career field? That is, what would you tell them to do, or not to do, to deal with the euthanasia-related aspects of this job?"

Coping strategies suggested by 242 euthanasia technicians were summarized into 26 different coping recommendations, which were then grouped into eight larger categories: competence or skill strategies, euthanasia behavioral strategies, cognitive or self-talk strategies, emotional regulation strategies, separation strategies, get-help strategies, seek long-term solution strategies, and withdrawal strategies.

In the coping recommendation "Vent your feelings"—advice provided by 15.7 percent of workers—some examples of survey responses were: "Cry," "Get your feelings out," and "Talk about your feelings."

In the coping recommendation "Alter your emotional attachment level," which 15.3 percent of staff provided, some survey responses were: "Do not get attached to any animal," "Not to take things personally, but still have compassion," "Do not become uncaring. ... Do not build up a wall," and "Treat each one as you would your own [pet]."

The third-highest coping recommendation that staff offered, "Know that euthanasia is sometimes the best option"—provided by 14.1 percent of employees—included survey responses such as: "Try to remember that they're not getting hit by cars or slowly starving to death," and "The animal is better to be euthanized than to possibly go to a home where they might be mistreated or thrown out on the street to fend for themselves."

Identification of coping strategies recommended by staff, the authors write, can benefit the animal protection field in two ways. "First, it elucidates the strategies that experienced euthanasia technicians may be recommending to new employees, and shelter managers may find this information useful for discussion and training. Second, it provides insight into euthanasia technicians' responses to euthanasia."

To read more about the study's methodology and results, see "Euthanasia-related strain and coping strategies in animal shelter employees," in *JAVMA* (Vol. 235, No. 1).

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