COPING WITH EUTHANASIA
By Roz Leiser, R.N.

Animal Control Officers and shelter workers routinely deal with many challenges besides euthanasia: cruelty, ignorance and carelessness towards animals; hostility from the public; disrespect for their skill, commitment and love of animals. Of all these stressors, however, euthanasia is the most heart wrenching and is unique to animal care work. No other profession has to end lives of those they deeply care about and want to help.

Issues surrounding euthanasia impact both job satisfaction and personal well being of animal care professionals, even those who do not directly participate. Whether you are at the front desk or are responsible for the decisions about which animals will be euthanized, or are a volunteer, if you work in a shelter, euthanasia affects you. Even people who work in no kill shelters know what will happen when they cannot accept an animal. In a study of a shelter in a major metropolitan area, the author concluded that the high turnover rate in shelters is partly due to the "failure of the shelter culture" to lessen the moral stress felt by workers involved with euthanasia.

There is no simple or "right" way to cope with euthanasia. Research in the field and information shared at our Compassion Fatigue and Burnout workshops reveals many creative approaches that can help reduce the stress. It is important to experiment and find out what works well for your particular personality and your organization.

Shelters have adopted a variety of policies and procedures to support their staff. Decision making about which animals will be euthanized and when that will occur may affect the impact. Who makes the decision, what criteria are used and whether staff or volunteers are notified in advance are issues to consider in crafting effective policies for your setting. Ideas that shelters have put into practice include:

- allowing requests for more time for specific animals
- working in pairs when euthanizing.
- having a choice about whether to be in the euthanasia room with a specific animal
- a Euthanasia Journal in the staff room
- a prayer posted beside the crematorium
- a periodic memorial service
- displaying photographs to acknowledge animals that have been there

Individuals cope in many different ways. You may fluctuate from being deeply moved to feeling numb over a period of time, or sometimes even from one day to the next. Approaches that can help handle the stress of euthanasia include:

- focusing on excellent technique helps some people find satisfaction by knowing they have done as good a job as humanly possible in making the experience comfortable for the animal.
- being the last person to connect with an animal you care about

- giving the animal a special walk, or food,
- holding and talking to the animal
- apologizing or offering a prayer.
- being emotionally detached during euthanasia
- using humor

Euthanasia expert Doug Fakkema recommends taking some time outside the shelter, in nature, to just be quiet after euthanasia. Other ways that people find comfort include listening to music, taking a walk, meditating, reconnecting with other people or animals and writing about the experience.

It can also be helpful to balance the painful feelings involved in euthanasia with the pleasurable, fulfilling feelings of other aspects of your work. You can focus on enjoying spending time with the animals, a person you have educated, an animal you found a home for or returned to a loving home; a co-worker you have supported. Maintaining a perspective that your work matters and is part of a larger effort by thousands of people who deeply care about animals can also be an important part of coping.

We know from those who work in other jobs that confront trauma, such as firefighters, police officers, and ambulance crews, that the most effective way to prevent burnout is to acknowledge the depth of emotions that arise in response to your work. An intellectual understanding of the reasons for euthanasia doesn't make you immune from having feelings about taking the lives of so many animals. "Normal" reactions to the abnormal situation of performing euthanasia may include sadness, fear, guilt, irritability, depression, anger, helplessness or hopelessness. If you don't express these feelings you are at risk for destructive behavior such as: substance abuse, isolation, misdirected anger, and in extreme cases, suicidal or homicidal behavior. Suppressing emotions can also lead to physical illness. Such medical problems as asthma, hypertension, headaches and ulcers are frequently exacerbated by stress. And recent research is showing that suppression of emotions may result in lowered immune system functioning, while expressing emotions may actually improve our immune function.

It is crucial to find people, whether co-workers, family, friends, or other support people, who can truly listen without judging when you need to talk. Animal shelter workers often feel that no one else understands. And in one sense, no one can completely understand an experience they have not had. But there are always people who are capable of empathizing and it is vitally important to connect with them.

And finally, find the time and commitment to take as good care of yourself as you do of the animals. If you are unable to do this, or if you are feeling overwhelmed on a daily basis, seek help. To continue to do the work you care so deeply about, you must also care deeply about yourself.

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