MAINTAINING RESILIENCE
By Carol Brothers, Ph.D. (February 2003)

The term "stress" has become such an overused word in our culture that people hardly pay attention anymore when we say that we are 'stressed out.' It is one of those 'sound bite' terms that is so often spoken and then rapidly passed over. Many times we even use it as 'spin control,' a way to skip past the feelings and the real issues. We may tell ourselves and others to "get a grip," or to "get over it." And if the feelings do bubble to the surface, we say "I lost it," or "she's out of control." It is so successful as a cover-up word that many of us no longer realize that it describes our feelings when they are overloaded or excessively aroused or shut down. We may feel extremely tense, explosive, teary, excessively fearful, numb, or emotionally exhausted. In animal care work our feelings are constantly being stirred. When we are unable to process them, we are affected physically (illness, fatigue), spiritually (hopelessness), and intellectually (difficulty in thinking or making a decision). When this occurs over a long period of time, our ability to cope breaks down and we may burnout.

There is no one right way to deal with strong feelings. There are as many ways as there are individuals because we each have personal styles that work best for us. The one thing that *is* for sure is that in order to be able to deal with what affects us in our work and in our personal lives, we must first acknowledge that we are being affected. This can be especially difficult in animal care work because our world often ignores, criticizes, or dismisses the reactions expressed by animal care professionals. When you tell people what you do, they may say things like: "I love animals too much to do what you do . . ." or "I don't see why you can't find a nice farm for them instead of doing all that killing…" or "You ride around in that truck all day just looking to pick up harmless animals…" or "Why don't you just get another job?" and more. Another factor is that working in the shelter or out in the field is so constantly demanding and full of emotional impact that there is often little time to notice the effect it is having. As we do the Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Workshops around the country, people ask us deeply thoughtful questions that reflect an honest uncertainty about what is normal in terms of feelings, stress, and coping. These questions are often couched in self critical statements about not being a truly healthy, strong, capable person. What follows is a sampling of these questions and some explorations into the issues they raise.

"What I've learned is, I don't get attached anymore. Sometimes I wonder about that."

It is natural for us to attempt to avoid what is painful. But this creates a unique dilemma when the main reason that we choose this work is precisely for the pleasurable feeling of caring for and being connected with the animals. We talk about trying to experience these deep feelings without becoming so drained that we are unable to care for the animals. This is such a powerful subject because the impulse to love and the need for attachment are basic emotions that we are born with, and it is an integral part of animal care work – much more so than in many other occupations. This struggle to find ways to feel the depth of our feelings and still provide good care for the animals, as well as

relating well to others in our lives, will be there for us as long as we are in animal care where we constantly face life and death issues while being open to love and connection.

"Some weekends I just don't want to talk to anyone. I just want to be alone and stay quiet all weekend. My husband says there's something wrong with me."
When we are overwhelmed, we tend to withdraw from stressors. This is a normal way to reduce arousal, induce relaxation, and assist in restoring normal sleep patterns. However, it can be confusing to us and to our partners, family, and friends, when we occasionally withdraw from them, especially since they may not be the cause of the distress. In animal care work, feelings are ever shifting from the angst of an abuse case, to the joy of a wonderful adoption, to anger or frustration toward those who should know better. This emotional roller coaster is constant and often wearing. To top that off there are the additional, unexpected crisis that are a regular part of this work. At times of emotional overload, almost any interaction, even with a loved one, may be more than we are able to handle.

"*I had to put my dog down last week, and I've been crying non-stop for a week... What's the matter with me? I've been in shelter work for 11 years, and I'm an experienced euthanasia tech. I should know better."*

Tears are the natural way we express our sadness. They are cathartic and help us feel relieved. Tears allow us to grieve so we can heal, move on and make room to experience other feelings, including joy. Sometimes we feel the need to apologize for our tears, but the truth is we wouldn't be crying if there wasn't something to cry about. We may also fear that once we start, we will never be able to stop crying. That is just not physiologically possible. Even a few minutes of letting ourselves cry can bring the needed release. A short timeout is also helpful. It could be a ten minute walk outside or a lunch break off-site. It is extremely important to have people and places we feel safe and comfortable enough with to share feelings. We also need to recognize that we often do a <u>very good</u> job even when we are not operating at our top level.

"I lost my son and my two dearest dogs a year and a half ago. I feel a void inside. When am I going to get over it? I'm disgusted with myself!"

Not only is the speaker feeling the enormous pain of several major losses, but also the additional sting of telling herself she's not being a good enough griever. There is no time limit on grieving! We *never* get over anything that matters to us. It just slowly becomes a part of us in some other form. Over time we may find that the pain, anger, or fear lessens and then suddenly it is touched again – but perhaps not in so raw a form, or for so long, or so deeply as before.

One benefit of not 'getting over it' is that we get to carry and cherish the memory of that special cat in our hearts. And we may get choked up for years when we think about him . . . or about the dog who makes us smile with pride when we remember playing with her, teaching her tricks, and thinking she must be the smartest dog in the world. Slowly these memories and feelings become an integral part of us. Will she ever, 'get over' the loss of

her son and her two precious dogs? Of course not. People who tell her it's time, don't understand. Instead, they need to ask her to tell them about her dogs, or her son, or ask her how she's doing and listen quietly to her – even as her tears flow. That is something we can do for each other almost every day. By understanding this natural flow of feelings, we can become less critical of ourselves and others.

Every one of us has deep feelings about something, either at work or in our personal lives. We grieve over animals that have been injured, abandoned, tortured, or euthanized before a "forever home" could be found. The intense and enormous range of feelings that come with animal care work is normal. These feelings deserve our attention and respect. This work is so demanding and enriching that it is important for us to maintain our resilience so we can continue to *make a difference . . . one animal at a time*.

Dr. Carol Brothers is a clinical psychologist in private practice for over 25 years with a specialty in grief and trauma. She was recently named as one of Maryland's Top 100 Women for 2003 and 2005. She was trained by the staff of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., and has traveled nationally and internationally staffing workshops for animal welfare workers and veterinary practitioners. She is a member of the Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Team and a trained Critical Incident Stress Debriefer. She has provided debriefings in animal care crises and more recently for responders to Hurricane Katrina.

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