

## **A Raid on a Puppy Mill (Part I) - Normal Reactions to Abnormal Events**

**By Carol A. Brothers, Ph.D. (September 15, 2003)**

We had recently given Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Workshops at a shelter that was about to raid a puppy mill. Because we are trained in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, we were invited to participate in the raid and then, in anticipation of its stressful nature, were asked to facilitate a defusing process for the staff. This is a process that can be very helpful in inoculating against stress related disorders. We set up the defusing to take place approximately 10 days following the raid when the adrenaline and shock reactions have worn off and participants are more able to benefit.

The following article will appear in two parts. Part 1 will describe the raid, followed by a chart of stress reactions often experienced by participants on the scene. This will be followed by a list of *What Helps*. These can be copied and used prior to a raid or other stressful activity as part of staff preparedness. Part 2 will describe what happened at the shelter after the raid and emotional reactions that typically follow such a highly stressful experience. This article will describe the defusing process and other techniques for managing stress.

HSUS and shelter staff met before sun-up to coordinate the raid and assure a surprise. There was a great deal of excitement as the teams were brought together and the shelter staff was told the name of the puppy mill. Applause spontaneously broke out, along with tears of joy, in the hope that this notorious place would be closed forever and that the used and abused animals would be rescued and cared for. Team leaders from the shelter and the HSUS gave careful instructions for the raid including the handling and documentation of the dogs and puppies, how to maintain a clean evidence trail, and what could be said and done at the site. It was very important to maintain approved legal procedures. We were instructed not to show any reaction during the raid since it was being filmed and they could contaminate evidence used in court. We were also instructed not to touch any animals or property without direction from the leaders. We were each assigned specific tasks for the raid itself. Then we anxiously awaited the phone call from the state police SWAT team telling us they had secured the site and that it was safe. While we waited, a large group of volunteers began to arrive to take over shelter duties. They would later help care for the animals brought back to the shelter. As the sun came up, shelter workers and HSUS staff shared snacks, excitement, apprehension, and the tedium of waiting.

Word finally came that the site was secured and we were ready to go. Upon arrival, we waited for instructions from team leaders to unload the many crates from our vans and to begin the rescue. It was very hard to resist charging into the many outbuildings to see these helpless animals and just grab them all up. HSUS and the shelter had prepared large supply containers for each team with equipment required for safe handling of the animals and for self protection. This ranged from heavy padded gloves to protect against bites to contamination overalls to protect us from feces and decomposing materials as well as gas masks to guard against fumes from uric acid. Also included was the sobering addition of body bags.

We were finally allowed to enter the buildings and rescue the dogs and puppies, as the veterinarian staff proceeded with examinations. The sight of so many puppies, some too young to be away from their mothers was both heartbreaking and exhilarating. At least we could help them. We were shocked to see food and water buckets contaminated with large amounts of debris. There were dead or dying puppies in each area. We watched vets trying to revive puppies who were close to unconscious, and we accepted the limp bodies of those who had succumbed. Older dogs were kept 6 or 7 to a small cage – walking on wire bottoms – cage after cage after cage – the smell of urine burned our nostrils. Others were kept in a small, hen-house type building. The heat had risen to 97 degrees. Tiny puppies wrapped their inert bodies around the base of water buckets in an unsuccessful attempt to cool down. The few momma dogs appeared too tired and worn to pull these heat exhausted babies to them. We worked as quickly as possible removing, tagging, photographing, crating, and then driving them back to the shelter. At no time was the meaning of the word *shelter* more clear.

Even in the extreme heat, I was powered by adrenaline. I determined to follow instruction so that every one of these babies would be saved and would serve as a piece of evidence to shut this place down. When we removed a puppy, we documented the time and signed our names to establish a chain of custody. Part of my job was to say the time out loud. After about 40 minutes, I found it was getting harder and harder for me to “tell time.” I fought this obvious sign of stress, fatigue and heat exhaustion. I desperately wanted to remain an integral part of the operation regardless of the effects it was having on me. My team suggested that I take a break (several times), and I had to agree (rather reluctantly).

Vans loaded with crates began carrying dogs and puppies back to the shelter. Veterinary staff started examining and treating each animal. This portion of the raid which started at 4 am that morning (and much earlier for shelter and HSUS leadership) went on until 2 am the next day when an exhausted crew cheered as the investigators announced that there appeared to be enough evidence to “shut her down.”

Some of the factors that helped to keep the stress level down at the site were careful planning, strength of leadership, supervision of staff, and the awesome determination and respect of both HSUS and shelter staff. Even after the raid, shelter staff continued to maintain silence as they took a misplaced beating from the public relations campaign designed by the puppy mill owner. But even a successful operation like this takes a heavy emotional toll on participants. Two days later I was snapping at everyone near me and feeling generally miserable. As I began to debrief with some of my trusted colleagues, I remembered that fatigue and irritability are often normal signs of participation in severely stressful events. It is also natural to experience some physical, intellectual, and emotional reactions during the event itself and immediately afterwards. Following is a chart of some of these reactions. It is followed by **What Helps**, which addresses stress management at the site.

## Crisis Stress Reactions: What to Watch For

Severe crisis or severely stressful, sudden or unusual events may overwhelm the effective coping skills that you usually use in order to deal with stressful situations. It is normal to experience some physical, thought, and emotional reaction to stressful events.  
*(Adapted from [www.counseling.swt.edu/crisis.htm](http://www.counseling.swt.edu/crisis.htm).)*

Physical Reactions	Thought	Feelings
Fatigue/Exhaustion	Difficulty Concentrating	Self-Doubt
Underactivity/Overactivity	Difficulty Solving Problems	Feelings of Helplessness
Digestive Problems	Difficulty Making Decision	Overly Sensitive
Muscle Tremors/Twitches	Isolation/Withdrawal	Fear/Anxiety
Startle Reactions	Lowered Attention Span	Hypervigilance
Headaches	Slowed Thinking	Moodiness
Dizziness		Anger/Irritability
Muscle Aches		Anger/Irritability
Vomiting		Tearfulness

These are normal reactions to a crisis situation.

### **What Helps: To Care For The Animals, You Must Care For Yourself**

1. TAKE YOUR BREAKS!
2. Follow the Chain of Command.
3. Stay cooperative. Stress undermines group cooperation because we have so many strong personal reactions.
4. Talk to people **off the site**. Talk is the most healing medicine
5. Help you peers by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing – **off the site**.
6. Breath – Put you hand on your belly and feel yourself breath. We hold our breath with fear and stress.
7. Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share these feeling with other off site.
8. Stay hydrated, eat, get sleep.

9. Be aware of and avoid attempts to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol.
10. WITHIN THE FIRST 24 TO 48 HOURS, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will generally alleviate some of the physical reactions.
11. You're normal and are having normal reactions. Don't label yourself crazy.

*The second part of this article will discuss the aftermath of the raid. It will continue the story and include a discussion of common, longer term stress reactions and suggestions for dealing with those as well as when to get help.*

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