

**A Raid on a Puppy Mill (Part II): The Aftermath
Inoculating Against Long Term Stress Disorders
By Carol A. Brothers, Ph.D. (November 30, 2003)**

In the weeks following the raid, the shelter had a lot to deal with. The rescued dogs and puppies were being housed in the shelter. The legal process was proceeding with many stops and starts. The local community was being barraged by a public relations campaign from the puppy mill designed to sway public opinion in their favor and to discredit the shelter. On top of all that, the shelter received threats of a fire or bombing. Shelter staff was understandably feeling a lot of pressure.

The rescued animals were kept in areas away from the public since they couldn't be adopted and hadn't been socialized. Shelter resources were spread thin providing care for these puppies and dogs who had extraordinary needs. Some cowered in the far corners of their crates terrified, while others were growing and demanding the attention and play of normal puppies. For a few days the shelter closed to the public to accommodate these special needs. The many requests for information about the raid or to view or adopt these animals had to be met with exceptional diplomacy. At times the staff became exhausted by the care required to clean, socialize, and medicate these animals while also trying to maintain the routine of the shelter.

The bombing and fire threats posed additional problems as visitors were screened upon entering the parking lot. Staff was frightened and forced to maintain heightened vigilance. Then came a slew of slanted newspaper articles and radio and TV reports that faulted the shelter for the raid. Others wrote letters to the editors of the local papers describing their pleasure in the puppy they had purchased from this local puppy mill. Shelter staff was warned that any response could undermine the legal proceedings and that the executive director or attorney would respond when appropriate. Shelter workers described being confronted in food stores when shopping or accosted by acquaintances who did not have the full picture and were being influenced by the PR campaign of the puppy mill. Shelter staff maintained their silence outside the shelter. It was very hard not to retaliate when confronted or offer information about the atrocious conditions at this puppy mill that made the raid the right thing to do.

With all of this occurring, it is understandable that the normal workings of the shelter were being stretched beyond capacity as were the coping skills of shelter staff. Many complained of exhaustion along with sleep problems; people began sniping at each other; others came in late or called in sick; and many described extreme ranges of mood from feeling absolutely furious to fighting back tears. It was difficult to maintain the elation experienced right after the raid as the legal process moved at the usual slow pace. Hopes would rise and fall daily with each piece of information about the legal maneuverings.

These stress reactions, while very painful, were normal and were exacerbated by the ongoing pressures faced on a daily basis. Recognizing that one has experienced a great deal of stress can help put some things in place to deal with reactions so they will pass

more quickly, the ability to work and function well is restored, and one is stabilized by having the sense of chaos reduced. The following stress survival skills can be copied and used for staff support in the immediate aftermath of a crisis as a means of managing normal reactions to abnormal events:

Stress Survival Skills

- Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation, is one of the best defenses for stress and will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals even if you don't feel like it (especially avoid lots of sugar, caffeine, fat, and salt). Increase fluid intake. Replace vitamins.
- Avoid increased use of tobacco.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of alcohol or drugs.
- Talk to people. Talk is the most healing medicine.
- Ask for help. Reach out to family, friends, colleagues, clergy. Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share those feelings with others.
- Realize that those around you are also under stress. Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing.
- Do things you enjoy - Give yourself a break - Importance of recreation. Spend time with family and other people you enjoy. Do not be alone *all the time*.
- Structure your time. Maintain as normal a schedule as possible. Keep busy, alternating times of activity with times for rest and relaxation.
- Do make as many normal daily decisions as possible that will give you a feeling of control over your life.
- Don't try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks of the scene. They are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through those sleepless hours.
- You may want to learn/use some relaxation/stress reduction techniques.

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James Fogerty, Ed.D., a noted expert in Crisis and Debriefing, describes the following steps as necessary for preventing long term stress related disorders:

1. Talk about the experience
2. Acknowledge and safely express feelings
3. Brainstorm options/find solutions
4. Maintain self-care.

SSACP provided a Crisis Debriefing which is a structured process that integrates these four steps. Five groups of up to ten shelter staff, including shelter administrators, met with SSACP Facilitators about two weeks after the raid to participate in this process. In a confidential setting of small groups, participants spoke about the events preceding, during, and after the raid. Shelter staff shared the reactions they were having and expressed fears, frustrations, anger, and tears. Through this process participants came to see their feelings and reactions as normal. They no longer privately wondered if their stress symptoms meant they were going crazy. They were able to break through their isolation. Many found that by safely sharing the painful parts of the experience, they freed up energy to express their enormous pride and satisfaction in being part of such an important undertaking. They were able to acknowledge how hard it has been to stay silent with the public and how proud they were at being so committed to supporting the legal process in this manner. Groups brainstormed about what would help keep stress down in the days going forward and implemented plans to support each other. Administrators developed a process for keeping staff updated on the legal proceedings. Staff was encouraged to continue debriefing with one another as a major tool for lowering stress.

Four weeks later many of the animals were in foster care. Local TV stations were suddenly offering reports supporting the shelter. The legal process continues to wind its way through the courts and staff is still required to maintain silence about the raid. Many report a great deal of relief from participating in the debriefing and continuing to be able to share events and feelings with one another. Some have said that they have found the Stress Survival Skills extremely helpful for normalizing reactions and providing tips to reduce stress. It is clear that those in the service of the animals and the public have to be as committed to their own resilience as they are to the care of the animals.

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