THE WISDOM OF FEAR
By Julia Hammid

How can you tell if an animal is afraid? People who work in the animal care field instantly recognize when an animal is scared. Animal care professionals, whether shelter staff, animal control personnel, rescuers or others see many, many frightened animals. A dog may curl its tail under, shaking and cowering. Maybe it growls or bares its teeth at anyone who comes near. A cat may bury itself under any available object, a blanket or box, even the litter pan. It hisses threateningly and may bite or scratch if your hand comes near, even to feed or pet it. You may not know *why* the animal is so frightened, but you do not doubt that it has a good reason. Many of the animals you come into contact with have been abused, abandoned, neglected or even tortured. Just being suddenly thrust into a strange environment with strange people and other animals is enough to turn a well-cared-for family pet into a terrified creature. Your heart goes out to all of them and you do your best to offer reassurance and caring.

A dog is brought in to the shelter. She was found wandering the streets or was rescued from being tied to a stake in a yard or maybe had to be removed from a home after her owner had died. Maybe you patiently stop by her pen several times a day, letting her get comfortable with your voice or just being nearby. Maybe after a few days or weeks, she starts to wag her tail when you come by, eventually letting you pet her and even take her out on a leash. As a professional you know that recognizing and respecting the distress the animal is in is essential to helping it survive and thrive. Recognizing and protecting yourself and others from danger is an equally critical skill. If you are a field officer and unexpectedly encounter a dangerous animal or person, you may need to leave and call for help. When an animal is aggressive, you use gloves or a catch-pole. In the shelter, you put a sign on the cage letting others know which animals should be handled with care or only with proper protection.

Is it as easy to tell when a person is afraid? Children in our society learn early to hide their fear, to be embarrassed about being scared and to pretend they're not afraid of anything. As a kid, were you ever called "fraidy cat" or "chicken" or "sissy"? Maybe you were teased with "dare you," "double dare you," "crybaby" or "there's nothing to be afraid of." It is easy to understand that by the time we're past elementary school, if not before, being afraid becomes something to keep to yourself. When and how you learn to hide your fear may vary depending on the circumstances in which you grew up. Boys and girls may also learn different messages about fear. But to some degree, it is uncomfortable for most adults in our society to admit they are afraid. When you look at the images presented by movies, TV and civic leaders, you see examples of how to be tough. We look up to those who plunge into danger alone, never needing help. We're taught that fear equals weakness.

But fear is a natural emotion. We are all born with natural emotions and the capacity to feel and express them. And each of them has an important, life-enhancing purpose. Fear is how we recognize danger, when something is not safe. If you had no sense of fear, you

might walk out in front of truck, ignore storm warnings and sail into a hurricane or hike far into the wilderness without proper equipment. You might try to capture a rabid dog with your bare hands.

Our emotions come wrapped up all together. If we're uncomfortable with any one of them, they all diminish, the pleasurable ones like love and joy as well as the painful ones. Some of us have learned to be numb to our feelings or to ignore them. We can also learn to pay attention to emotions and know that we can choose how to act on them. Since we live in a society which doesn't teach us very well how to express our feelings safely (especially sadness, anger and fear), finding a safe place to talk about your feelings is a powerful tool for keeping them all flowing. People whose jobs constantly stimulate emotion, such as fire, police, rescue and medical personnel, are learning how to take care of themselves by doing debriefing. Debriefing is a structured way of talking about the feelings that are stimulated in the course of doing these sorts of jobs. We are learning that animal care professionals are equally subject to constant emotional stimulation. Debriefing is a valuable tool for you as well.

When have you felt afraid while on the job? You may have had to confront a dangerous animal. Or you may have found yourself face to face with an angry or threatening person, a member of the public or even a co-worker. What does it feel like when you are scared? Is it hard to breathe? Does your heart race? Do your hands or knees shake? Does a shiver run down the back of your neck? Do you get a knot in your stomach? Often new people coming into the animal care field feel that if they show fear, people will think they're not good enough. They may try to act tough and fearless. They may take unnecessary risks to prove themselves. Those who have been in the field a long time have learned to respect their fear and that it's OK to get away, get protective gear, get help or back-up. They learn new skills and make sure they have proper equipment.

As a professional, you know it's part of your job to maintain your own safety, as well as the safety of the public. There is real danger in the animal care field and your innate sense of fear is a valuable tool. You've probably heard it said that courage is not the absence of fear, but is knowing when you are afraid and confronting the danger wisely. In the animal care field that means protecting yourself, getting help or knowing when the risk is too great. You are confronted with dangerous situations daily and yours is a field that is constantly stimulating your emotions, including fear. That is why, like other first-responder occupations, talking about the feelings, debriefing, is one of the ways of keeping yourself well so you can continue to do the work you love. Taking care of yourself is an essential part of being a professional.

So it is smart to acknowledge fear, to be able to say, "I'm afraid," I'm not comfortable going there…" and then to back off, assess the situation, take precautions, get support, call for back-up. As a professional you use your fear wisely to keep out of danger. You exercise caution mixed with good judgment. Paying attention to when you feel afraid, taking appropriate action and then talking about it in ways that also feel safe, not only protects you from harm but maintains your resilience to support your colleagues, respond to the public and care for the animals.

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