

Wildlife rescue and the potential impacts on mental health

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Abstract

Wildlife rescuers and volunteers are faced with a number of mental health challenges that many aren't prepared for, or equipped to cope with, without support. While many for-profit businesses now offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) for staff, this service is not generally available for volunteer organisations.

So how are volunteers coping with the pressures of workload, the deaths of animals, the guilt of not being able to save an animal in their care, and dealing with the human element? While some carers make enquiries about counselling, many choose not to attend. Why is this?

Keywords: *mental health, support groups, counselling, EAP, bullying, isolation, grief, loss, stress.*

Materials and Method

A preliminary survey was undertaken to establish some general demographics (such as age, gender, length of time as a carer, etc.) and to collect the thoughts and feelings of wildlife carers about mental health awareness. The survey collected responses about feelings experienced whilst volunteering, whether carers have knowledge of mental health and support programs provided by organisations, whether they have sought treatment in the past, and their thoughts about the perceived reactions of organisations to mental health issues.

Random participants were then interviewed in an effort to further clarify responses. These interviews added depth and detail to real life examples.

Interviewed participants are referenced by initials and date of conversation only in footnotes to maintain their anonymity.

Survey results overview

There were 534 respondents from Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand.

Respondents represented 84 different organisations, some with multiple branches across a country, some independent and self-funded. Just over 10% of respondents worked independently of an organisation. The varieties of referenced species also varied widely, and included koalas, macropods, birds (land and sea), reptiles, sea-lions, and penguins. From North America; alligators, eagles, and moose were also represented.

91% of respondents identified as female, with an average age of 55 years, with the remaining respondents split between male (8%) and X (no gender specified) (1%) within the same average age bracket.

17% of respondents had less than 2 years' tenure as a carer, 25% between 2–5 years, 21% between 5–10 years, and 36% had more than 10 years' experience as an active wildlife carer.

Respondents were asked to indicate if they had ever felt particular emotions as a result of their wildlife activities, these being: grief, numbness, overwhelmed, sad, stressed, guilty, angry, hopeless, useless, and frustrated. They were also asked to indicate any other emotions they had felt. A further 17 positive words and 47 negative words were recorded. This indicates that people have many and varied feelings about their work.

When asked about the reaction by an organisation to a mental health issue as a result of wildlife activities, the majority of respondents perceived that the organisation's response would have a negative impact on their volunteer role. Potential impacts could include not being given animals to care for (73%), having animals taken away (69%), or being judged as no longer able to provide non-animal related assistance (64%).

6% of respondents were aware that they had access to counselling services, 45% didn't know, and 49% believed that they had no access to services.

Respondents were asked to consider their views about mental health in general. Overwhelmingly, respondents considered mental health to be as important as physical health (96%), although willingness to seek a mental health professional was considered a low to middling priority. People cited being too busy (72%) or being unwilling to talk to a stranger (81%) as reasons for not seeking assistance. However, 68% also indicated that talking to someone they didn't know would allow them to be more open. Over half of respondents (54%) were not willing to talk to anyone about mental health issues, even though it was acknowledged by a similar number (57%) that their mental health could be improved. 43% of respondents have sought the services of a mental health professional in the past.

In the 'Any other comments' free-text field at the end of the survey, 87% of respondents chose to leave a comment. These comments fitted into nine common themes (in order of commonality): bullying, isolation, grief, financial burden, sleep deprivation, lack of communication, feeling needed and valued, and lack of support from organisation or government. The comments varied from short (10 words) to very long (nearly 1,000 words). The majority averaged 258 words and mentioned a minimum of one-third of common themes. Survey comments overwhelmingly mentioned negative impacts on the mental and physical health of carers, with a number of experiences that evidence significant impact on mental health, including suicidal ideation.

Discussion – Contributing factors and possible resolutions

Many respondents are getting something positive from the experience of caring for and living with wildlife. The positive impacts of animal care and cohabitation (predominantly domestic animals) have been extensively researched and written about in papers, journals, and books (Blazina (2011), Brooks et al (2018), Mishra & Schroeder (2014), Preece-Kelly (2017), Weil (2018), and Wilson & Turner (1997)). For this reason, this paper focuses on the potential negative impacts as less research has been conducted in this area and it has a greater relevance to the volunteer wildlife carer community at this time.

In this preliminary investigation, the four most significant common themes will be addressed.

Bullying and Isolation

Bullying is the systematic abuse of power and is defined as aggressive behaviours or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Bullying is not something usually associated with adults. It is a reasonable presumption that, as people mature and progress through life, childhood bullying behaviours are left

behind. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case as, according to 39% of survey participants, it is something that occurs within wildlife organisations.

Bullying by peers has been mostly ignored by health professionals but should be considered as a significant risk factor and safeguarding issue (Feldman Hertz & Donato, Wright, 2013). The eight (8) respondents who said they had had suicidal thoughts all cited bullying and internal politics as the causes of isolation from a group they had previously felt included in. Such a change in situation leads to carers feeling inadequate, lonely, harassed, useless, and unwanted. These feelings can also add to people's fear that they are no longer of use in life in general, or that animals will be removed from their care. Fear of judgement by others, and fear that animals will be removed by the organisation is often why carers choose not to attend counselling¹.

When conflicts between carers and committee members are investigated internally, it's often the people who are doing the bullying or contributing to conflict who are charged with resolving the complaints^{2,3}. This can lead to carers leaving an organisation, or remaining but continuing to feel a sense of isolation from the group. Such outcomes are in contradiction with the Volunteering Australia Standards that state: 'Volunteers are given information about how to make a complaint or raise concern with an organisation and to relevant bodies'.

Grief and loss

Most organisations have a tag line such as, 'Rescue, Rehabilitate, Release', but this leaves out what wildlife carers actually do. They CARE. When a carer has been getting up four-hourly for feeds for months and the animal dies, it's reasonable to be upset and to question what happened. It should be expected that carers become attached to their charges, and it's reasonable that carers be given support when animal losses occur. Carers often become attached to their charges, even after a short period of time⁴.

Grief arising from loss of domestic animals is a well-researched area (Kemp, Jacobs & Stewart, 2016, Rujoiu & Rujoiu 2013, and Bronwen, 2016) and it has been shown that the human/animal bond is the same as a human/human attachment bond for some people (Hewson, 2014). This relationship includes animals being called 'fictive kin' or 'furbabies' (Sable, 2013 & Margolies, 1999). As Chur-Hansen (2010) highlights, the loss of an animal can often lead to disenfranchised grief because the loss of the animal is not shared by others and a grieving process is rarely observed. It is also rarely a shared experience with family members or friends. Feelings of isolation, grief, guilt, and anger can be magnified when an animal is lost via euthanasia (Barnard-Nguyen et al, 2016).

As wildlife carers we are often faced with the death of an animal in care. Whether it is a lizard that has been in care overnight or a joey that has been in care for some time, the loss is felt for a variety of reasons. Did we do enough? Did I make the right decision? Was the animal fed correctly? Was it just too stressed? Did I miss something? Was it suffering? Is this the 10th animal lost this month? (What else is going on in the carer's life?) The questions can be many and are often unanswerable.

¹ Conversation with GY 30th March 2018

² Conversation with L 21st March 2018

³ Conversation with SG 30th March 2018

⁴ Conversation with LW & BW 24th March 2018

When a carer loses a significant number of animals⁵, support for accumulated grief and loss becomes necessary. This also applies to carers working in short-care periods or high mortality roles, such as carers looking after birds or macropods, and the role performed by shooters. Grief is also exacerbated by sleep deprivation and stress, although it is often pushed aside in an attempt ‘to get on with it’ (Williams & Green, 2016 and Laing & Maylea, 2018). As Luiz Adrian, Deliramich and Christopher Frueh (2009) say, grief not expressed will resurface in times of stress and can often be debilitating to the point of post-traumatic stress.

Financial burden

Caring for injured wildlife comes with a huge financial burden for some carers as well as organisations. This is often in the initial ‘set-up’ phase of caring but can continue. A kangaroo joey costs an average of \$1200 to raise to release age⁶. A wombat costs an average of \$1800⁷. These amounts take into account food, housing, veterinary bills, dressings and medicines, heating and cooling, travel, and incidentals. This also takes into account the cost of animals that die before release. While the initial veterinary bills are covered by wildlife organisations, in many cases the ongoing medical care is covered by the carer. Some carers have even bought property to ensure that the animals they and others release can be safe into the future.

Travel to and from rescues, vets and training can often be in excess of 50 kilometres each trip. With the current reclaim rate of 66c per kilometre (ATO 2018) the costs of using a car add up quickly. Some carers travel in excess of 10,000 kilometres per year⁸.

Volunteers that cover phone rosters, often 24/7, incur the costs of making phone calls to find someone that can attend to a rescue. It takes an average of five calls to find a volunteer that is able to collect the wildlife in question⁹. The number of calls per day can vary greatly depending on the time of year, day of the week, and weather conditions.

This financial burden can add to the mental health stress of caring for animals. An animal could potentially die from added stress, often carers do not want to ‘give up’ on the care of an animal despite the financial pressures, as an animal that is already suffering pain and stress may suffer further from change of venue and carer.

Conclusion and recommendations for consideration

As a result of this preliminary survey and investigation, it has become evident that this is an area that needs further study. The information covered in this limited paper has not included analysis on the impacts of sleep deprivation, lack of support from federal governing bodies, or lack of communications between committees and volunteers.

It was suggested by many survey respondents that external support groups would better support members than the current ‘buddy’ system many organisations have in place¹⁰. This could be a service provided by the organisation and facilitated by a mental health professional to ensure that a safe and non-judgemental space is provided. It would enable volunteers and carers to support each

⁵ Conversation with L 21st March 2018

⁶ Conversation with SG 30th March 2018

⁷ Conversation with LW and BW 24th March 2018

⁸ Conversations with LW 24th March 2018, LD 16th April 2018, BT 26th March 2018 and MA 17th April 2018

⁹ Conversations with LW 24th March 2018 and LD 16th April 2018

¹⁰ Conversations with LW 24th March 2018, LD 16th April 2018 and MA 17th April 2018

other and share grief. Having the organisation fully or partly fund such a service would also relieve some of the financial burden many carers feel.

Facebook groups have also proved to be beneficial in the area of support. This social media platform enables wildlife carers from across the country (and world) to communicate with other carers at all hours. This enables the sharing of information, photos, stories and heartache¹¹. As with all social media platforms, however, Facebook is open to abuse if not administered well, potentially leading to another place for bullying and isolation to occur.

Organisations can help to ensure that carers' costs are managed by providing active carers with access to trade accounts for medical supplies and food, by providing fuel vouchers, and contributing to telephone bills. These could be funded or provided by sponsorship from small or large organisations. Organisations could also use orientation and species-specific courses to provide information about potential costs and travel distances.

When dealing with complaints, personality conflicts, and other difficult situations, ideally a person or persons independent of the conflict could be brought in to help resolve issues via mediation. All members should be in receipt of the organisation's constitution upon receipt of membership payment so they have a complete understanding of the processes in place. The constitution should contain up to date details of complaint handling and which government departments or agencies to contact, such as Volunteers Australia or National Parks and Wildlife (if in NSW).

When organisations are open about making sure carers know that assistance is available, it encourages members to help out in situations that are likely to result in stress.

Caring for wild animals and dealing with the human element of wildlife rescue and caring can often be thankless. This invaluable volunteer role needs to be researched in more depth and over a period of time to ensure that the impacts of positive and negative mental health consequences are better understood.

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¹¹ Conversation with L 21st March 2018 and SG 30th March 2018 and

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