

Strategies to Deal with Emotional Trauma

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All of those that are involved in the rescue, care and rehabilitation of Australian native wildlife face many challenges. Some of these have the potential to cause not only physical harm but also significant emotional trauma. The purpose of this paper is to identify a few of the critical points in a wildlife carer's life that may cause significant stress, with the potential to lead to mental health problems and suggest a number of strategies that may be used to deal with these issues.

No matter if we are a large or small organisation, an individual shelter or carer we have a duty of care to manage the occupational health and safety of those we train or work with. Most of us do consider the physical safety of others in our training, induction and on-going management, much of which has considerable structure and strict protocols. However, can we identify and reduce the impact of emotional trauma through far more considered and structured processes? Do we need to identify those critical points and manage them as we would any other OHS issue? As with any risk and hazard analysis there is a need to recognise those points that may put the carer in a situation of emotional trauma that will cause acute or chronic mental health problems. Once identified we may be able to put into place harm minimizing management protocols. In this presentation I reflect on my experience in regards to training, rescue and working with those involved in wildlife rehabilitation. The critical points I would like to discuss are:

1. Training and working with new people in wildlife rehabilitation and rescue
2. Those involved with a significant traumatic event such as a natural disaster
3. Understanding the variability in emotional starting points

1. Training

Obviously there is significant variation in the way individuals react to all those situations that may be encountered in wildlife rehabilitation and the coping mechanisms that are used. With a new person it is important to understand those issues that concern them the most and then account for these in their training and early management.

I conducted a survey in 2011 of new trainees in regards to those issues that would cause them the most emotional trauma; the results are as follows in order of importance;

1. Method of euthanasia
2. Witnessing an animal with a major injury and unable to help.
3. Caring for an animal that is not responding to treatment
4. Seeing large numbers of dead animals which is caused by human cruelty or neglectful actions.
5. Release of an animal that may have bonded with
6. In a situation in which they feel helpless or unable to resolve

To account for these concerns preliminary training or awareness of these issues is critical. The early experiences should also be carefully managed; this could be done in a number of ways;

1. Graded exposure to severity of an animal's condition and at each point access the response
2. Put into place a buddy or mentor system
3. Have strong work plans
4. On-going structured and un-structured counselling

2. Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as bushfires obviously present significant and concentrated exposure trauma. The degree of emotional trauma for the wildlife rescuer depends on many factors. I will highlight just a few and suggest ways to possibly reduce the emotional impact.

In my own experience the role an individual plays within a rescue team can affect their emotional response. The team leader, who should be experienced, has to make the decisions on euthanasia with subsequent guilt of right or wrong emotions. The group leader also has to manage the trauma of other individuals and incidents of conflict between team members that may occur. Other roles within the team that should be considered in the variable response to emotional trauma are those who conduct the euthanasia and those who are inexperienced with bushfire rescue.

A number of strategies could be used to minimise emotional harm on the rescue field. Firstly, have a well structured pre-brief, tell the team what to expect and explain the rules of engagement. Continually monitor the team members during the rescue and do not disregard their feelings. Take time to explain and educate those that are less experienced as to why particular decisions are made in regards to an animal's future viability due to the types of injuries. The team leader should not engage in debate with other team members but rather engender trust and faith.

Another critical point is the post-rescue debrief at end of each day. In some cases it may be required to restrict prolonged exposure to significant animal trauma by insisting on rest days. This can be where the unstructured counselling process can occur, team members can share their experiences and emotions, and gain support from each other. However, there may also be a need for ongoing support for those that may suffer from post-traumatic stress. This may require access to professional support.

3. Understanding the emotional starting point.

No matter what situation the wildlife carer is in, it is important to them and the others around them, to understand their emotional starting point. Most of us who work with wildlife have a strong emotional connection with the animals in our care. The stronger this connection the greater the potential for emotional trauma, which in some may lead to mental health issues.

Taking all the issues that I have previously discussed into account I feel it would be of value that designated individuals are trained in recognising the signs of emotional trauma. This can be done in a structured short course in mental health first aid. The purpose of this course is not to teach people to be professional counsellors but develop skills in the recognition of mental health symptoms. This allows team members to provide support and guidance until professional help can be obtained. More information of this course can be obtained from the website;

www.mhfa.com.au.

All of us that are engaged in wildlife rehabilitation will experience stress and trauma at some stage, but what matters most is how we deal with these experiences and the support we give and receive in this journey.

GREG GORDON: Victoria University, Teacher in Animal Studies. I have had a strong interest in and cared for animals for most of my life, both within and external to my professional life. In regards to wildlife I have been involved with their rescue, husbandry and education. I developed, along with significant support from Wildlife Victoria members, a short course in wildlife rehabilitation, which evolved into an on-line format that has been very successful. I have been on the committee of Wildlife Victoria for a number of years, on the steering committee for the Victorian state body, and other discussion groups from time to time. I support a local group of carers in the inner west of Melbourne. I also have had the privilege to work with a group people who organized the first Wildlife Rehabilitation conference that was held at Victoria University in Melbourne.