

Taking Care of Those Who Protect Animals During the Pandemic

By Peggy A. Rothbaum

Before the nightmare COVID-19 pandemic wreaked destruction on us, I was honored to do a webinar for NACA/Justice Clearinghouse called “Protecting the Protector: Who Is Taking Care of You?” I started by stating, “In today’s stressful and unsettled world, the men and women in humane animal care/control and law enforcement continue to give themselves fully to our society. The physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion from the

demands of their job, including what they witness, makes them vulnerable to burnout.” I used a standard definition of burnout: “Burnout comes from strong emotions that go on for too long with no resolution or comfort. Emotions are too strong, too intense, too unpleasant, or too difficult. Burnout is often accompanied by feelings of exhaustion or disillusionment.” The terms “compassion fatigue” and “moral injury” are also often used to mean the same thing. Symp-



toms can include changes in mood, often related to depression and anxiety, lags in attention, memory, and concentration; physical symptoms, such as headaches, high blood pressure, and illnesses; behavioral changes that impact productivity and health, ranging from increased procrastination to substance abuse; diminished drive and increased feelings of alienation and despondency. Burnout can overlap with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a “normal reaction to abnormal events.”

In my work, I think about people, events, and life in general under the umbrella of trauma. It covers being subjected to direct experience, witnessing experiences, and a variety of physical and emotional symptoms. The trauma perspective incorporates emotions, legitimizes and normalizes them, focuses on individual strengths and resilience, and offers hope for recovery.

This is all fine, but now we are in a whole other, horrible, unfamiliar universe of trauma because of COVID-19. The widespread societal nature of this trauma makes coping with it harder because there is virtually no one who is untouched by it. All of us will in likelihood have some version of PTSD. And PTSD can show up immediately or later, even years later. Yet, we all must manage. Obviously, people on the front line are more traumatized. This is undeniable. Some of us are saving lives, others of us are supporting those who are saving lives, and some of us are keeping our society functioning. This includes the men and women in humane animal care/control and law enforcement. Everyone needs support. No one will emerge unscathed from this nightmare.

Life was already traumatic enough for the men and women in humane animal care/control and law enforcement, but now we are dealing with a traumatized population. We already know that some people take their own individual trauma out on animals. We are seeing a spike in partner violence and child abuse, so we may assume that there also is a spike in animal abuse, because they are linked. In general, the people with whom you are dealing may be more volatile or just generally unreasonable. Shelters are overwhelmed and in need of supplies and assistance. People also panicked from inaccurate reports of how the virus could be transmitted from animals to people and started abandoning their pets. Some shelters have had to restrict their services or lay off staff. Some shelters are overwhelmed with an increase of animals. Yet, some shelters have completely emptied out, which is fantastic, but it raises concerns about

what will happen if people decide that they are no longer able to adopt or foster. Homeless people and people who are already and risk for themselves and their pets are now at increased risk. In all likelihood, more innocent, healthy, often totally sweet and adorable animals have to be put down. Although, according to the FDA, there is currently no disruption to the supply chain, that requires monitoring. In short, more trauma on the job.

So, how can you deal with this ongoing trauma? First, you must realize that our current situation is terrible. There is no way around this fact. It cannot and should not be denied. It is going to impact you. And your own personal resources may be depleted because of your own stress, and the people around you may be less available and able to be of help due to their own stress. Some of the impact may be conscious. That is, you are aware of it. You can probably think your way through whatever distress is plaguing you and make rational decisions. You might make some mistakes, which is normal, but you can draw on your past experiences and put them to work for you. However, for all of us, our unconscious plays a powerful role in all that we do. Some emotions from trauma become unconscious. This means that we are not fully aware of them or may not be aware at all. Some traumas and emotions may be from the past – like emotional echoes. When we try and bury our emotions, we may not even realize that they are still there. This is a way that we try and protect ourselves. How can we become more aware of that which we are not aware of so that we can maximize our potential?

My mentor defines the unconscious as “the things that we do that we do not see or know about but that others see or know about.” So I often ask people for advice. I ask, “What do you see that I do not see?” Or, “I am stuck, can you help me?” This has to be someone I trust. Kindness, with support to grow, is needed, not overly critical, negative feedback.

Unconscious emotions can make us more vulnerable (to being hurt, to making mistakes, to relationship problems). They can get us stuck. This is because of transference. Transference is exactly what the word means. Emotions from one situation or relationship are “transferred” onto another relationship or situation. Transference can be negative or positive. It is only a problem if it gets in the way of love, work, or play. We may not be aware of this transfer. I have experienced this myself.

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When I was first in the practice of psychology, naturally, I did not have very many patients. I had too much free time. I used to walk downtown to the giant Woolworth store. I could get some exercise and enjoy picking up a few little items. Once inside the store, I typically became aware that I was incredibly anxious.

I attributed it to what was going on in my immediate professional life: I had just started my practice, I didn't know whether I was any good at doing psychotherapy, I wasn't making much money, the office furniture was expensive, there was a lot of outreach and networking to be done, I worried about the impression that I was making on new professionals, etc. I tried to calm myself down. It always seemed to be a bit futile. But, as I left the store after making my purchases, I became aware of the fresh air, and my anxieties seemed to melt away. Of course, I would be OK, I tried to tell myself! One day, I had a sore throat. I went into Woolworth and selected a pack of Life Savers from the counter by the cash register on the other side of the store from where I typically paid. When I got in line in front of that counter, I had a terrible anxiety attack. I felt really hot and broke out into a cold sweat. I hadn't thought that I was all that sick, and here it seemed that I suddenly had a fever. I paid and went outside. The cool air hit my face, and all of a sudden I no longer felt like I had a fever!

Then I remembered. ... When I was in the third grade, I had stolen a pack of Life Savers in that very store. They were in front of the register that I had used on that adult day. I remembered feeling, as a child, the cold air on my face when I exited the store with my booty. However, I was terrified at what I had done. I remember looking behind me as I walked home, sure that a police car would come racing down the street toward me at any moment.

It took several days for me to stop being terrified that I would be discovered and punished. I never told anyone what I had done. Not only that, but until that



moment, I had “forgotten.” I wanted it to go away and I made it so.

Think about how many times I had been in that same store over those decades. Think about how many times I had bought Life Savers in other stores or had shopped in other Woolworth stores. It wasn't until all of the pieces fell into place, in exactly the same way that they did on that particular ill-fated day of my crime, that I remembered the trauma of what I had done and the fear and anxiety associated with it.

As soon as I remembered (it became conscious) what had happened, I was no longer anxious in Woolworth. In fact, I felt incredibly competent. I felt like shouting to the rooftops: “Hey, look at *me*! I am so competent at shopping at Woolworth!”

This is a funny example (feel free to laugh at me), when nothing is funny right now. But you can get my point. By making my emotions, which had been living in the unconscious, become conscious, and then connecting them with past emotions, experiences, and behaviors, they no longer were a source of stress for me in the present. In fact, after I made the connections, and only after all of the pieces fell into place, I felt competent and totally in control of my situation. You can do that for yourself now.

Other ways that I manage trauma for myself:

I co-authored a book, *Taking Care of Little Snoogie*, which deals with my sadness over losing a pet and offers comforting suggestions for others and me. Some of the proceeds from book sales go to animal charities, which makes me feel like I am helping.

I donate to charities: money, my book, or my animal jewelry, for them to use to raise money.

You can do the same:

Do things that have always brought you comfort or helped you to calm down (hobbies, exercise, music, art, reading).

Talk to a psychologist. Get other professional help if you need it.

Talk to peers. Talk to friends or family (only if this is not too stressful for them). Spend time with friends and family.

Remember that emotional echoes from the past combined with present-day realities can cause stress. Pause, reflect, and make your own personal connections with the past and the present ("transference"). This will help you to better create your present and future.

And try to maintain hope. These are difficult days, more so for our animal friends, but every night, no matter how dark, has a dawn. *Onward.*

Dr. Peggy A. Rothbaum (drpeggyrothbaum.com) is a psychologist in private practice in Westfield, New Jersey. Before starting her psychotherapy practice, Dr. Rothbaum worked in research, educational, medical and health care settings. She also served on several health and mental health advisory boards. Dr. Rothbaum is a trained and experienced researcher. She is the author or co-author of numerous articles (in print and online) and book chapters, as well two books for professional and general audiences. She has written about, consulted, and conducted workshops on how to use psychological principles to improve coping and manage burnout in a variety of settings. She has extensive experience with a range of trauma and the emotional and behavioral reactions of trauma survivors, as well as the reactions of helping professionals. She is a passionate community activist for humans and nonhumans. ❖

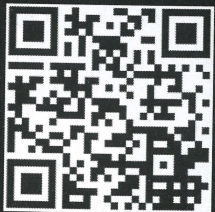
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