

The Power of Your Unconscious

By Peggy A. Rothbaum



I was honored to give a webinar for NACA via The Justice Clearing House this past summer. My focus was on the power of our unconscious and how it can be harnessed to help us cope. Ninety-one percent of participants wanted to know more about my topic. This article reviews basic background material and presents the excellent questions asked by the attendees.

The physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion from the demands of your job, including what you witness, make you vulnerable to burnout. Burnout comes from repeated direct exposure or victimization to trauma, being forced to participate in trauma, or from witnessing trauma.

The concept of trauma certainly applies to humane animal care and control officers dealing with the abuse and neglect of helpless animals.

The effects of trauma are felt in different ways by different people, sometimes even years later. Trauma does not just “go away with time.” You cannot just “get over it.” Trauma produces emotions for everyone. Emotions can be comforting and helpful, or upsetting, causing more stress. Emotions are not a “sign of weakness.” They are a sign that we are human. Emotions are only a

problem when they make us feel bad or interfere with work, health, or relationships.

Sometimes emotions from trauma become unconscious. When we try to bury our emotions, we may not even realize that they are still there. The unconscious develops ways to protect ourselves, to shut out pain, “forget,” not care, deflect emotions. But it can get in the way of change. It tricks us into believing that familiar is better and easier, even if consciously we know that this is not necessarily true. Unconscious emotions can make us more vulnerable (to being hurt, to making mistakes, to relationship problems), as we don’t really understand what we are doing. We can get stuck.

This is because of transference. What is transference? Transference is exactly what the word means. Emotions from one situation or relationship are “transferred” onto another relationship or situation. We may not be aware of this transfer. It is not the identical for everyone.

Examples of negative transference: A woman raised in an alcoholic family marries an alcoholic; a man survives a bitter divorce and marries a second wife who is much like his first wife; a boss screams at an employee for making a common mistake that the boss often

makes, too. Examples of positive transference: passion; commitment; a cardiologist goes into the field because her beloved father is in the same field; a researcher studies pancreatic cancer because he promised his father on his deathbed that he would try to find a cure. Transference is only a problem if it gets in the way of love, work, or play.

How can you use this information to reduce stress and avoid burnout at your job?

There are basic realities about your job that are going to be very stressful for anyone. You are dealing with sometimes-ugly reality. Sometimes it is terrible. Common everyday stress reducers such as exercise, yoga, talking with friends and family, making art or music, to name a few examples, may be helpful.

In addition, making transference connections can also

help us cope. Does the current situation feel familiar? Does it remind you of a particular person or interaction? Aha! These connections can help us understand feelings and reactions, calm down, and make different choices. It is important to monitor emotions as well as behavior. Control and try to understand any impulses to act out. Watch for triggers. What “sets you off”? Seeking help if needed is a good idea. Talk to a psychologist for psychotherapy, supervision, coaching, or behavior management. Get other professional help if you need it.

Below are Q&As from the webinar:

Q: Can unresolved burnout suffered from a previous job impact performance in my current position?

A: Absolutely. One of the articles on my website that you can download addresses that question. We wrote

(continued on page 31)



(continued from page 29)

it because it was the second anniversary of 9/11, and we were dealing with our own trauma. We also talked about how things like the impact of early trauma can affect us later. It can absolutely transfer from one job to another. That's a good question.

Q: Many of us in animal welfare got into this job because we love animals. Unfortunately, many of us have to euthanize perfectly healthy and good-sheltered animals, ending their lives way too many times. The guilt never goes away; it keeps coming back. Even though I don't have any choice and I do consider myself fairly strong emotionally, it always comes up and drains me. What can we do?

A: This is something John Thompson brought up in one of our first conversations. This is the epitome of the difficulty of your job. I really think that what you need to do is talk about it. You can talk to each other; that's helpful, because you're all experiencing the same thing, but I also would really encourage you to find a psychologist who understands trauma. It is so understandable that you would feel guilty. It must be so difficult. You have to do these things that you don't want to do, and it feels bad. It is better not to walk around feeling like that. This is one of the things that our society imposes on you. In a better society, we would be taking better care of our animals.

Q: As a supervisor, how can we distinguish between those officers that are suffering from burnout versus those who just need more training and help with developing emotional intelligence?

A: I don't know that there's a definite answer, but you talk to them, obviously, and listen to them and see what they say. If they're talking about symptoms of burnout (exhaustion, trouble sleeping, irritability, mood changes, distractibility), or they bring up events from the past, that's what you've got. Other people who need more training might have fewer of those symptoms. They will benefit from more nurturing, support, and supervision from you. You can see them grow, they're not stuck, or they don't appear to be stuck. People who are burned out appear to be stuck.

Q: Even though more people are open to seeking mental help, the culture in our profession will look at us as weak if we seek help and many times label us. I personally know people who are struggling but refuse to seek help. How do we break this culture to find ways for an officer to seek help without feeling marked or labeled as crazy?

A: I agree with you. I think to a certain extent people are more open about mental health help, but there is still a stigma. People perceive themselves, and others

perceive them, as weak. It doesn't help that the mental health infrastructure has been gutted. It doesn't help that we have people screaming and yelling, and then people assume that that's what lack of mental health looks like. Do your thing in your little corner of the universe. Start talking to people about mental health. Have people come in from the mental health fields to talk. Do seminars. Educate people about mental health.

Q: How do we identify these types of hidden, unconscious events in our lives that are still impacting us today through transference?

A: That's a really great question. The first thing that you can do is look at yourself. Do you have little spots of vulnerability, things that make you anxious and seem like ... I hate the word "overreact" because it's so judgmental: "Oh, I overreacted to that." Well, maybe not. Maybe it's because your mother said the same thing to you when she was screaming at you as a child. Look at things where you think you are having a reaction that maybe doesn't fit the present situation. It seems a little uneven. It seems that you're telling yourself, "I really should be able to do better here." Or if you have other situations that feel somewhat similar to past situations, and you do a little better, this is positive change. So if you feel a little unbalanced like you are running a marathon on a sprained ankle, consider that transference may be at work.

There is another thing you can do, and I do this a lot because I'm aware that I'm not aware, if you will. I get people who are close to me to help me by saying, "Listen, come on. You tried that last time, and it did not work," or "Are you really going to do that again?" or "We already discussed this situation" or "I love you, and you don't really have to do it that way." Or maybe you have a mentor at work or go talk to a psychologist. If you keep doing, thinking, or feeling the same thing over and over again, let others help you see, "Wait a minute, that doesn't seem to be working for me."

Q: Can trauma on the job transfer to your relationships with family members, or actually be transferred to family members?

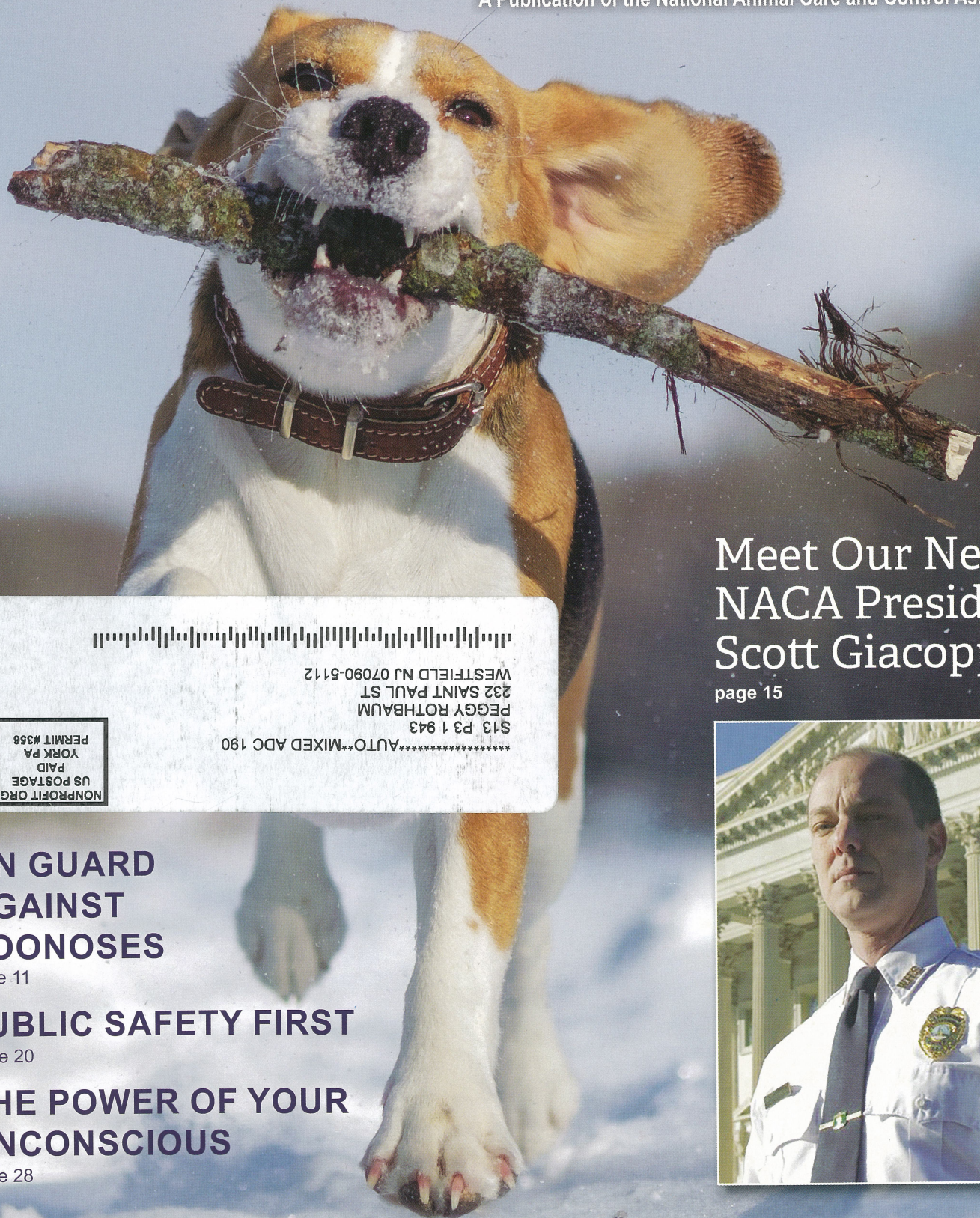
A: Yes. Absolutely. One of my veterinarian friends says, "If I go home and I look upset, my wife doesn't even ask. She knows that I had a hard day and I need to go sit somewhere." Can you teach family members to have the same reactions? Yes, of course. If you go home and you're cranky and unreasonable because you really had a bad day and your temper's really short, you can definitely model that, for example, to your child. That's a good time to seek help. You can understand your transferences better and unlearn the behaviors.

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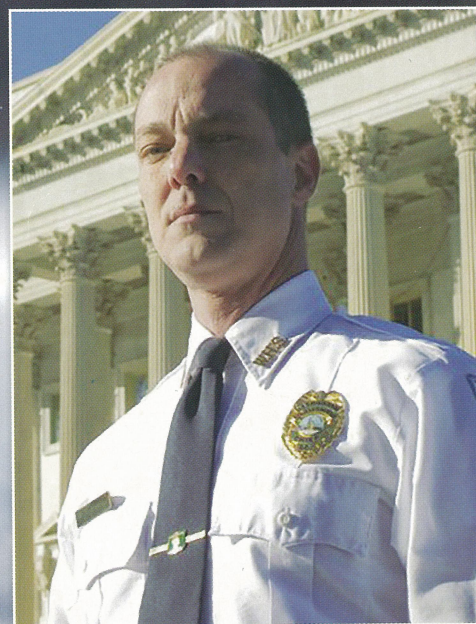
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Meet Our New NACA President Scott Giacoppo

page 15



ON GUARD AGAINST ZOO NOSES

page 11

PUBLIC SAFETY FIRST

page 20

THE POWER OF YOUR UNCONSCIOUS

page 28



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