

Rescue Burnout: Causes and Cures

While many people may be familiar with burnout or stress related issues with certain jobs, most people have never heard of fairly new phenomena called "rescue/advocate burnout". This is when rescuers or advocates get overwhelmed by their duties, so overwhelmed that they can no longer function. It can be amazing to those from outside the industry. They think that what we do is play with animals and have fun. While this is true, we also have to see the worst cruelty inflicted, deal with severely limited budgets and lives literally hanging in the balance. It is more amazing that more of us don't end up with more problems than we have.

Rescue work is extremely stressful, no matter what position you hold within the rescue. Burnout is a common problem that eventually affects almost everyone. It's hard to prepare new volunteers or rescuers for this because their enthusiasm blinds them to the warning signs and the words of the more experienced. You can tell them about it but it goes in one ear and out the other. They don't understand until they've arrived there themselves, and then they don't know how to cope with it.

It's funny that with the issue being so prevalent that it is so seldom talked about. Funny, that there are so few resources to deal with it or articles talking about it. Funny that, for an industry so bent on helping, we ignore ways to help ourselves. The first step is recognizing and admitting to the issue, and then we can move forward.

How many times have I heard or even made the following statements?

- "I'm so tired and discouraged all the time. I feel like I'm never get a day off. The harder I work, the harder I have to work. Nothing ever gets better, it seems like it only gets worse. It never ends."
- "Sometimes I miss the life I had before rescue. It's been so long, I hardly remember the fun I used to have, hobbies, trips, friends. I miss them so much!"
- "I want to quit so badly but I can't. The animals are depending on me to save them. Thinking about quitting makes me feel guilty and ashamed of myself. But I can't go on this way much longer."
- "I am tired of all the bickering. I want to help, but I keep getting bogged down in the infighting and feel like I'm not accomplishing anything."

It's hard to get people to talk about it. The subject makes people uncomfortable, especially those who are suffering from it. I am sure there are reasons for this reluctance: maybe we're afraid we'll be seen as weak, unable to measure up to saintly expectations; maybe we think we've failed somehow. Whatever the reason, this silence has created a gaping hole that many rescuers fall into, never to be seen again. Burnout is probably the most dangerous problem that rescuers face. We need to talk about it and help each other through it.

To cope with burnout, you have to take back control of your life! We get into rescue to help animals in our spare time but it quickly takes over all our time and resources, becoming the only thing in our lives. To be happier and healthier we need to put rescue back in perspective:

- Take care of yourself first. You're no good to anyone or anything if you're tired, miserable, broke, or angry all the time. Neglecting your own needs makes you less effective, not more. You deserve to eat and sleep well, to be healthy, to have fun and be happy as much as anyone else.
- Look at your situation and compare it to where you want to be. What are your true personal priorities in life? Make a list of them beginning with those most important to you. Are the ones at the top of your list getting the largest amount of your time and resources? If not, rearrange your time so they are.
- Let some things just slide off your back. Don't let others in the rescue industry drive you crazy. (Please see the note at the bottom of this article if this applies to you as either the attacker or the one being attacked.)**
- What activities besides rescue do you enjoy most? Do you (or did you) have a hobby? Make another list. Do something from that list every day. It doesn't have to be a big thing, it can be as small as reading a few pages of a novel or taking a walk with your dog. The important thing is to make time every day to do something that makes you happy. Don't put this off until you have time - make time! This little daily break will do wonders for your attitude and well being.
- Take at least one day a week off from rescue. Do whatever you want or need to do on that day as long as it doesn't involve rescue. Even shelter employees have days off and so should you!
- Stay connected to the 'real' world. Some volunteers get so deeply involved with rescue, they isolate themselves and develop a very narrow negative mindset. Read books and newspapers, visit with non-rescue friends, go places, meet new people.
- Keep a record of your successes and look at them often. In rescue, the negative can seem to overwhelm the positive. Our efforts can feel insignificant and we forget how much good we've done. Keep a photo album of all your placements, all your happy endings, and review them regularly, not just when you're feeling low. You'll be amazed to see how much you have actually accomplished. Be proud of them!
- Ask for help. None of us are in this alone although many of us seem to think we are. When you're discouraged, depressed, overwhelmed, or just need to vent, tell somebody! We all need support at times. When we support each other, we all feel better. Lean on someone.
- Set realistic goals. You can't save the world single handedly, so that isn't a realistic goal. Set goals that you can achieve within a reasonable amount of time so you can have successes. Vague long term goals like someday moving to the country to open your rescue isn't a good one, but helping feed horses at a rescue twice a week is.
- Evaluate your rescue activities and make adjustments that allow you to have a life as well as a rescue program. If you've been in rescue long enough to feel burned out, you've been in long enough to know what you're best at, what you can afford, and how many animals you can care for properly. Use this information to set new priorities and limits- and then stick to them.

The last tip is probably the hardest for rescuers to do because it means saying "No" on occasion. That is something we are not very good at that. The emotional aspects weigh heavy on us. We're constantly pressured to say yes, but more often than not that pressure comes from ourselves. When we do say no there is usually a great deal of guilt attached, and it's amazing how many

burdens we'll take on to avoid feeling guilt. You have to say no to survive for long in rescue because the animals never stop coming and people will never stop making demands of you. Saying no is the only thing that gives you any real control. It's the most powerful thing you can do to get your life back on track and make yourself happy and fully effective once again.

So far we have talked about the basic burnout that most of us feel at some point or another. However, at its worst burnout can affect the care the animals receive. It can go beyond just the issue of the well-being of the rescuer/advocate, at its worst burnout can impact the animals themselves creating a situation that nobody could foresee and one that could actually put the animals at risk.

Often rescues take in animals or take on obligations without thinking about the long term. These are animals that cannot ever be adopted or face extreme physical limitations or illnesses, so we hold on to them. When the word gets out that you will take even the hard to place you find yourself with more than you can handle, but you find yourself not being able to say no and your rescue becomes a sanctuary. While sanctuary work can be gratifying and wonderful work, it isn't what you first saw for yourself, planned for, budgeted for or have appropriate space for. This creates a whirlpool that can suck you into the darkest depths.

One of the dangers with individuals who feel a deep moral obligation towards doing rescue is that, either by intent or lack of realization of what they are doing, they become a sanctuary, with increasing numbers of animals inhabiting a finite space, using up finite or otherwise limited financial and other resources. The care and concern that drove them into starting to take in a few animals that needed a good home warps into an almost obsessive compulsion to take in everything that comes to their attention - regardless of their ability to properly care for it.

The result is animals kept in small, improper enclosures that are irregularly cleaned, with the animals living in their own wastes. As money gets tighter, proper food may be sacrificed for something that is less nutritious, or less regular. Proper care by a veterinarian is replaced by animals going without. Since necessary drugs are expensive, the animals either do without or are treated in a hit or miss fashion with over-the-counter drugs not made for animals and home remedies. The stress of the situation adversely affects a number of these animals. Instead of recovering and being adopted out to a good home, they languish in the overcrowded and less-than-appropriate conditions, resulting in more animals dying than make it out alive. It becomes a vicious cycle that the rescuer can't see any way out of.

Learning how to just say "no" when yet another personal calls and says "I have a [fill in the blank] I can't keep any more" is one of the hardest things to do. This is especially difficult if one is the only or one of a very few people doing rescue in a geographical area. When a rescuer doesn't learn to say no, however, all the animals under that rescuer's care are put at risk.

Another factor compounds the excessive intake of animals: fewer and fewer animals begin to be adopted out. For a variety of reasons, most known only to the individual themselves, these rescuers refuse to adopt out any or most of the rescues. Perhaps at some level they realize how poor - even inhumane - the conditions of care have become and they don't want anyone to see it. Perhaps they get too attached to the animals and think that no one can provide the care they

require. With others, it could be an acquisition or 'saint' mentality: see how I dedicate myself to these poor animals in need, sacrificing my own life and needs for them?

It can be easy to get into the "none of the idiots out there can care for these animals properly" mode. It is also easy to fall back on "none of the other people doing rescue around here are as good or careful as I am." But the bottom line is, if a rescue doesn't make serious efforts to find good homes, they won't find them, and if they keep taking in animals without the physical or financial support required to care for all of them properly, the rescue ultimately isn't any better than the people they've rescued the animals from. In essence, they become what they were trying to prevent in the first place.

Horse rescues usually don't have enough funding that smaller pets like dogs, cats and even bird rescues do, just by virtue of the fact that costs are much higher to care for horses and some people see horses as something to throw away or even slaughter rather than saving. So, most equine rescuers, even if they are able to get donations end up funding a great deal of the expenses out of their own pocket.

Adding to the stress of too little resources are volunteers who never show up, or who ended up not doing what they supposedly came to do. Even if you get volunteers, they are often young or inexperienced so they must be supervised, and if you have to be there, overseeing their every step, it's ultimately double the work, not lessening it. So, ultimately, the responsibility for getting everything - cleaning, feeding, diet preparation, medication schedules developed and administered, medical care needs attended to, vet trips, taming and socializing, behavioral enrichment, etc., falls squarely on the individual rescuer.

How often do we turn on Animal Planet and see the result of well-meaning people who take on more than they can handle who have turned into hoarders? Or hear about rescues that have been in business for years having been closed because they got overwhelmed and just couldn't provide the care the animals deserved? Often it is even mentioned as rescuing from the rescuer on message boards and in chat rooms. It is up to **US** to ensure that we don't fall because there are plenty out there watching for our failures to justify theirs.

Most people started out with the best of intentions...but never learned to say no, to draw the line. Most are deeply concerned about the welfare of animals, involved in education, but all need to come to grips with the fact that they aren't horse traders or the public's garbage can. It is important to know and understand that as much as we morally feel a responsibility towards every animal in need, we simply cannot in good conscience take in more animals than we can physically and financially support. To keep taking them in and not be able to provide the care they require ultimately is as cruel and inhumane to the animals as some of the homes we have rescued them from.

It's just one little word, but one that can make such a difference in the health and well-being of the animals and the human: No.

****Note: I need to take a minute to address the infighting issue. When your rescue is fighting for its life, you may find yourself lashing out at others. When feeling stressed, it isn't the time to**

look at others as your vision isn't as clear as it should be before going on the attack. We must remember that we are ALL in this industry because we care about the animals and small policy issues, such as fences or adoption policies, aren't the most important issues, the animals are. If you are the subject of these attacks you need to realize that often it is because someone sees you as successful when they are having a hard time or they have lost their focus. You cannot let these naysayers take away your focus. Remember when you first started in rescue you had to ignore those trying to sway you from what you saw as your life's goal. Keep that mindset if you have looked at what you are doing and you feel that you are on the right track. If you aren't sure then you may actually need help and it may be time to search for it.

Of course, if you see a rescuer falling into that dark hole you should try to help, not attack. If your efforts to help are rebuffed you should obviously report the issue to the appropriate authorities. It is never appropriate to snipe on public comment boards or by sending nasty emails. Those don't help and they don't get the animals the help that they need and deserve and they could prevent someone else from asking for help.