



## Animal Ethics and Well-Being with Dr. Frank McMillan

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# When animals 'snap'

In November of last year, an ice-skating bear in a Russian circus attacked two people during rehearsals, killing one and critically injuring the other. As everyone probably knows, this sort of thing is not an isolated incident. Consider just a few of hundreds of other examples with animals: At a circus show in Portland, Oregon, a chimpanzee was performing on a motorcycle when he abruptly rushed into the crowd and bit and scratched a 12-year-old girl seated in the front row. In a well-known incident, Roy of the Las Vegas Siegfried and Roy act was suddenly mauled by a tiger during a performance. On ABC's *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, an employee of the Moscow Circus, which was on tour in New York, was attacked without warning by one of the show's elephants, sending her to the hospital with serious injuries. And a horse in a traveling circus went "berserk" and tipped over a children's cart, injuring 20 children and two adults.

Especially common are the incidents that have occurred with animals being used to give rides. In a marine park show in California, a spectator was given a chance to ride on an orca's back. Without warning, the well-trained and normally gentle whale suddenly turned and rammed the woman several times, then bit down on her leg and wouldn't let go. Rescuers finally freed the woman, and she was rushed to the hospital. In Florida, six people were riding on the back of an elephant when the elephant suddenly swung her trunk at the trainers, trampled over chairs and climbed into the bleachers filled with spectators, then charged out of the circus tent and stampeded through the fairgrounds.

Wild animals kept as pets have also had these psychological "breaks." In one such incident, a Connecticut woman was severely attacked by her friend's pet chimpanzee. A more recent incident involved a woman in Pennsylvania who was attacked and killed by her 350-pound pet black bear while cleaning the bear's cage.

I don't present the animal incidents above for the shock value but rather for the valuable lessons they teach us about animals' minds. From these incidents, we are learning things that are crucial to taking better care of animals.

In humans, the psychological phenomenon involved here is technically referred to as "sudden personality change," but even scientists will refer to it as "snapping." It is a psychological break: Something in the mind suddenly gives way and causes the person to behave in highly uncharacteristic ways. What the animal incidents show quite clearly is that animals' mental health and stability is more like that of humans than we previously knew. Animals' minds are a complex and delicate balance of neurochemical connections that are vulnerable to serious damage. Like our own, animals' minds can only bear so much — they have a breaking point when forced to cope with pressures that are highly contrary to their nature.

We are also learning that, just as in people, we cannot predict with any degree of accuracy which animals will reach a breaking point, when any animal will reach that point, what kind of pressures or stresses will trigger such a break, or whether animals who "snap" will recover or experience permanent changes. The implications of this knowledge for the welfare of animals go beyond those individuals who outwardly show psychological disturbances. The fact that some animals are pushed past their breaking point means that there are many other animals being stressed up to, but not quite past, the point of breaking. And this, as anyone knows, is the point of struggling to cope and a time of suffering — a time when the individual is doing everything he can to "hold it together."

Without a doubt, incidents like those mentioned above make a very sad statement about the way animals can be treated by people. But they also contribute valuable new knowledge about just how extraordinary and special animals' minds are. The lessons in this regard greatly strengthen the case for treating animals with respect and kindness, which not only ultimately makes a better world for the animals, but assures that those beautiful creatures who were driven to the breaking point did not suffer in vain.

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