

Burned Out?



When you've done all you can do, sometimes the best thing you can do is to go see a movie.

► **By Faith Maloney**

An all too common message was posted to the members' forum on the Best Friends Web site recently:

"I take in homeless cats and try to find them homes. Word gets around, so I have people threatening to take their cat to the pound, where it will be killed, if I don't take it. I always offer to help these people solve their problems. Most don't even want to try. I don't understand how people can dispose of a pet like it were a used tissue and not a feeling being. This is beginning to wear on me. All I have been able to do for the last two days is take care of my own cats and then go back to bed."

This rescuer, like so many, was in the throes of full-fledged burnout. Burnout affects people in all walks of life. Anyone can become stressed at work and start putting the soda in the cupboard and the glasses in the fridge. But in the world of animal rescue, it comes with a range of acute feelings: from anger to anxiety, and helplessness to guilt and a sense of failure.

In animal rescue, burnout is seen most often in people who work the front lines.

This can be the employee or volunteer who mans the front desk at a shelter or humane society or an animal control officer on call for abuse and neglect cases. The turnover in these jobs tends to be high. Also affected are the people who take the calls on animal help lines, or the person who is out rescuing dogs and cats in their community and taking them home. For many people, these jobs can be overwhelming.

The woman who posted her message on our forum found she had plenty of company. Someone else wrote in to say: "Now

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that winter is here, all I can think about are the cats that are suffering outside in the freezing weather. I know I can't save them all, but I find myself constantly trying to figure out ways to fit in 'just one more.' I need to put some balance back in my life, but I don't know how to block out all the horrible images from my mind."

Burnout can be crippling. I experienced a heavy dose of it while acting as the unofficial animal control officer for my community. I would stare at the red blinking light on the phone answering machine, unable to respond and filled with dread about what new horror awaited me.

But there are solutions to the syndrome. Joy Jett, one of our online forum moderators, gives wise advice to people experiencing burnout. "You are your first priority. If you don't have enough energy to care for yourself or your own animals, you have nothing to give to anyone else."

You need to ask yourself some basic questions. Perhaps what you are currently doing is no longer the right job for you. We are not all cut out for coping with the wicked world – or at least not every time the phone rings. Some people can handle the trenches for a year or two and then need to find a different job in the animal field. Others need to get out altogether and do something quite different – at least for a while. And there are some who can do the same job year in and year out without ill effect. John Paul Fox has been the Humane Society of Utah's animal cruelty officer for almost 30 years, dealing with cruelty cases all over the state. He is as kind and compassionate today as he was when I first met him over 15 years ago.

In my own case, after doing a front line job for a number of years, I realized that it was not for me anymore. I knew that I still had a lot to offer, and I was able to use my experience here at the sanctuary to help others and still make a difference for the animals.

You may or may not be able to make that kind of move, but there are certainly things you can do to lessen the feelings of burnout right now.

First, share your feelings with someone else. Sometimes just expressing the frustrations can help you see another way of looking at things.

Here are seven tips that may help:

1. If you're flooded with calls to rescue animals, stop answering the phone and let your voicemail or answering machine pick it up. If you have a spouse, friend, or family member who can field the calls for you for a time, ask for their help. Give them a tip sheet on how to respond to various situations. If you can't get help, return the calls when you feel most able to deal effectively with the problem.

2. It helps to be able to tell the person about options and possible solutions for the animal they are calling about, whether it's a stray, a feral, or a pet. If possible, provide them with literature on how to find homes for homeless pets.

3. Keep positive reinforcement in your life. Look to all the stories of animals that were helped. (That's how *Best Friends* magazine began!)

4. Seek out friends and other animal people when you feel overwhelmed. You can support each other emotionally. Online forums and chat rooms can provide help, too.

5. Recognize that you did not create the problem. All too often, we compulsively try to take on the responsibility for a situation we did not originate. Your part in the situation is to offer people help, advice, and some of the tools they'll need to extricate themselves from their problem.

6. Strive for balance in your life. Go and see a movie, take up a hobby, or explore the great outdoors. When we take care of ourselves, we get to live another day to help the animals.

7. Remember that most people love their pets and would never abandon them, and that there are lots of people who, like you, take in strays and work to rescue animals. You are not alone.

Burnout is not the end. It's a signal. You need to listen to what those feelings are telling you. One lady told me that she could no longer cope with volunteering at her shelter and now just writes checks. We need the people who write the checks as well as the people who pick up the poop or answer the phones.

When you find the role that works best for you, you will be happy and motivated. Best of all, you'll have become even more effective at helping the animals. 🐾



“Mankind's true moral test, its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals.”

– Milan Kundera