



Stressed Out – Volunteer Burn-Out!

As you release all physical effort and quiet your thoughts, your body gets a rare opportunity to rest completely, rejuvenate, renew, let go, heal and grow.

Take a deep breath and exhale ...

What is Volunteer Burn-Out for Humans and Pets!

The CORE foundation of any non-profit (or for profit) organization is the VOLUNTEERS (or employees), who need to be healthy in mind and body to successfully contribute. We can help ourselves with awareness, educational enrichment (self and pets) and preventive maintenance.

Expressions have been cleverly coined for volunteer burn-out:

- Fried / Toasted / Crackers / Emotionally Drained / In a Fog / Zoned Out / Zombie, Compassion or Empathy Fatigue

Burn out can be caused by various environmental and life circumstances. Individual people and pets deal with stress in their unique way. I like G.E.L.: Genetics loads the gun; Environment pulls the trigger; we make Life Choices that help change how we deal with it.

Both pets and humans experience stress and have similar physiological responses, often referred to as the “fight-or-flight” response. Here are some insights into how this works for both:

Pets

When pets, like dogs, are stressed, their bodies release hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. This triggers several physiological changes, including increased heart rate, muscle tension, and heightened sensory perception. Dogs may exhibit:

- **Fight:** Aggressive behavior, such as barking or biting.
- **Flight:** Attempting to escape or hide.
- **Freeze:** Becoming immobile or unresponsive.
- **Fool Around:** Engaging in playful or distracting behavior to cope with stress.

Humans

Humans experience the fight-or-flight response that is controlled by the autonomic nervous system. ANS releases adrenaline and cortisol preparing the body to either comfort or flee from a threat – AHHH a SHARK. Just be sure you are near the ocean before screaming this out. Here are the usual responses:

- **Fight:** Confronting the stressor aggressively.
- **Flight:** Avoiding or escaping the stressor.
- **Freeze:** Becoming immobilized or unable to act.
- **Fawn:** Trying to please or appease the threat to avoid conflict.

Burn-out is when one functions without mindfulness. Total burn-out is when one isn't capable of functioning at all, like being awake, but unconscious at the same time. We have all been there. Have you ever driven home and can't figure out how? We go into overdrive and automatic control. Thank goodness and our bodies. If we didn't, we may drive right straight up a tree. When our mind and body are not in synch, we are like the proverbial hamster on the wheel, mechanically going in circles. That's great if it brings you joy. If not, time to find a new hobby.

Compassion and empathy fatigue appropriately fits what may happen to the heart-centered volunteers, for example, registered therapy dog teams. Whatever we call it,

**BURN-OUT IS A REACTION TO UNRELIEVED, CONSISTENT, DRAINING;
SAPPING CLUSTERS OF EMOTIONAL AND/OR PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION**

The impact of dealing with stress has been recognized by medical professionals for over 150 years. Health care professionals, big pharma, social media, friends, colleagues and family offer “ways” to cope with stress. They may help, BUT behavioral change needs to accompany this process for long-term relief. Otherwise, we are treating the symptoms, scolding the dog and virtually back on the hamster wheel going in circles. For change to happen, well, change must happen even in baby steps.

Types of Stress There are several types of stress including acute stress, episodic acute stress and chronic stress.

Acute stress is a body's immediate reaction to a new and challenging situation. It is the kind of stress you might feel when you narrowly escape a car accident. For a therapy dog, it could be visiting a facility, and someone sets off a fire alarm. This is where the “team relationship” is essential. The dog (or other pet) can look to us for comfort and guidance as their advocates.

Episodic acute stress is when you have frequent episodes of stress. This might happen if you're often anxious and worried about things you suspect may happen. You might feel that your life is chaotic, and you go from one crisis to the next.

Chronic stress is when you have high-stress levels for an extended period. Long-term stress like this can have a negative impact on your health. It may contribute to anxiety, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure or a weakened immune system. Depending on the individual's coping skills, if stress is not addressed it can wreak havoc on our well-being with an overall sense of fear that things just are not "okay".

Triggers are everywhere. At times, a dog sniffing the garbage or a partner looking at us with what we feel is a weird expression can shoot us to the moon. Oftentimes, burn-out is why we stop doing what we are enthusiastic about.

Some Symptoms of Stress include, but are not limited too:

1. Decreased ability to discuss and/or process feelings
2. Complaints about headaches, exhaustion, or losing sleep
3. Over-reaction to frustrating situations or obstacles (conflict)
4. Mood swings (depression / anxiety)
5. Expressing feelings of powerlessness, ineffectiveness and guilt
6. Decreasing work (volunteer or other) performance and isolation
7. A general appearance or lack of focus, disorientation or apathy (including pets)

Why is Burn-Out/Stress Such an Intrinsic Part of Volunteering?

One answer is that humans are what naturalists call bonding animals. We look to each other for meaning and position. We naturally relate and empathize with those who turn to us for help or guidance. We want to make a difference, leave a legacy behind, and give something back. It makes us feel good and important.

Volunteers usually don't get paid in what society deems "payment for services" aka MONEY. We get payment in ways that are enriching and equally satisfying – when respected and acknowledged. It's our responsibility to ensure we, and if applicable our pet therapy partners are appreciated. We are a TEAM. We set the standard of our treatment.

Beyond the Training Manuals and Workshops

Professional volunteer teams need to train, assess and learn how to recognize stress in themselves and their pets and others. BEYOND THE TRAINING MANUALS, ZOOM AND WORKSHOPS, volunteer teams need:

- Continuing education (tools and resources)
- Learn when to be flexible, clarify, assess, adjust and set boundaries
- Politely say “no” and/or negotiate a compromise (win-win)
- Recognize time for personal renewal (for pets too)
- Seek and/or create a network with common-minded people to process issues w/o judgment and one-upmanship

Dealing with Stress When it Occurs to Yourself, Your Pet or Others

BREATHE! Taking a deep nose-to-navel breath can help diffuse a situation. Smiling can help too.

Balance is a myth but still a worthwhile goal. As is prioritizing and organizing. Life is peaks and valleys, *more like a seesaw*. Sometimes up and sometimes down. Those perfectly balanced middles are rare. Enjoy them. There is wall art with an Elephant and a Butterfly sitting on a seesaw. It says, “It’s all in the Mind!” Guess who has the Elephant in the air?

Open, but focused communications. Showing concern can ease loneliness most people feel when under extraordinary stress. Volunteers need to give themselves permission to express their feelings without judgment with someone they trust and who listens.

Listen empathetically and respond with acceptance and understanding. No need to “own” or “take responsibility” for other’s feelings. Providing the opportunity, environment and tools, like listening and sharing doable coping skills, is helpful.

Encourage stressed volunteers to take a step back from their work and focus on their daily lives, relationships and activities.

Motivate volunteers to keep up their physical stamina with regular healthy meals, drinking plenty of water, exercise, and relaxation and be mindful of the same with pets.

Noticing and acknowledging when volunteers need time to grieve (cope with loss of a client, pet, other) is a gift beyond words. We all grieve differently. Not always in the order of Elizabeth Kubler Ross’s Death and Dying. The steps can fluctuate back and forth.

Yoga and Meditation: Yoga and Meditation are ways to balance mind and body, relieve tensions and tune-in to the present moment.

Perform an activity that is physiologically incompatible with stress (counter-conditioning): Lock yourself in a room or closet for 5 minutes. Sing, hum, dance, breathe, do something silly or nothing at all. Laugh aloud. Choose to sit and be silent. This will give you a short respite from the emotional and physiological effects of stress.

Choose where your energy will go! Everything in life is a lesson. We can choose where to focus our energy (positive/negative). We can choose to manage stress.

10-10-10: Ask yourself; will this matter 10 minutes, 10 weeks, 10 years from now?

Cultural Considerations

Be mindful that men, women and various cultures express their feelings differently, as do children, teens, adults and older adults. Do not assume anything when you encounter cultural differences in reactions to stress. Simply observe, listen, learn and clarify with open-ended questions. “How can I help?”

Mindful Humor! Used carefully, humor can lighten most situations. Assess and observe before chiming a chorus of “Be Happy” with someone who recently suffered a loss. If you don’t know what to say – sharing can help. “I don’t what to say. If you need me, I am here. I can listen.”

DID I MENTION HUMOR? *You know you're STRESSED OUT when:*

- Relatives that have been dead for years visit & suggest that you get some sleep.
- You can achieve a Runner's High by sitting up.
- You say the same sentence repeatedly, not realizing you've said it before.
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- Trees begin threatening you.
- You can see individual air molecules vibrating.
- You explore the possibility of setting up an IV drip of espresso.
- You wonder if brewing is an essential step in the consumption of coffee.
- Things become “Very Clear”, and you feel “Very Enlightened”.
- You begin speaking in a language that only you and Channelers can understand.
- You believe that if you think hard enough, you can levitate.
- Your dog just told you in perfect English to go and play in traffic.
- You have great revelations concerning Life and the Universe but can't quite find the words before the white glow fades, leaving you more confused than before.
- Antacid tablets, Protein Bars and CBD Oil become your sole source of nutrition.
- You begin to talk to yourself, disagree about the subject, get into a fight, lose, and refuse to talk to yourself for the rest of the day.
- You yell: “STOP TOUCHING ME!” even though you're the only person in the room.
- You swing around in the grocery store and YELL FREEZE YOU’RE UNDER ARREST.
- You don’t drink but find it a convenient way to explain how you dressed yourself this morning with your top on backwards, two different shoes and shorts in Winter.

Enjoy the Journey!