

Becoming a Wildlife Volunteer – Mental Health Awareness

To Begin or not to Begin...?

A common fear that many potential volunteers have when they join a wildlife group is feeling that they couldn't possibly do what other carers and rescuers do - especially when you hear stories about all night gigs searching forests for an injured koala, or attending traumatic rescues where animals have been hit by cars and need to be euthanised. Let's put your mind at ease straight away. The volunteers who attend these types of rescues have special training and many years of experience under their belts. You would not be expected (or permitted) to attend those rescues until you are appropriately trained and have a lot more experience.

You might also think "OMG! I can't do the hours these guys are doing!". Again, relax - you can do as little as a few hours a fortnight/month or whatever your schedule allows. It is important that YOU feel comfortable with the time you can allocate. Your volunteer hours can be flexible. We all have lives to live, families, work and commitments. It is not a competition and ALL volunteers are so gratefully appreciated. Any contribution you make will make a difference.

The Starfish Story

Adapted from The Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley, 1907-1977

While walking along a beach, an elderly gentleman saw someone in the distance bending down, picking something up and throwing it into the ocean.

As he got closer, he noticed that it was a woman picking up starfish one by one and tossing each one gently back into the water.

He called out, "Hi! May I ask what you're doing?"

She replied "I'm throwing these starfish into the ocean because the sun's up and the tide's going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die"

The elderly guy commented, "Lady, you do realize there are kilometres of beach and there are starfish all along the way? You can't possibly make a difference!"

The woman listened politely. Then she bent down, picked up another starfish, threw it back into the ocean, past the breaking waves, and said, "It made a difference for that one".

Feelings and Emotions

As a wildlife volunteer, whether it is as a Hotline operator, rescuer, transporter, carer or coordinator, you will experience a range of emotions and feelings at various times. These can include:

- Stress
- Fear or panic
- Sadness
- (Feeling) overwhelmed
- (Feeling) inadequate
- Anger
- Defeated

This is all **normal, natural and to be expected**. We **ALL** feel these emotions at certain times - yes, even the people who have been doing this for years and have been on the frontline during traumatic events and rescues. They have **ALL** felt a variety of these feelings.

There is no “standard” response - what is important though is to understand that any response you have is **FINE**. It is important to know that there is support available for you if you feel you need it. Always remember, it is brave to ask for help rather than succumbing to burnout and compassion fatigue.

Everyone deals with stress differently. Whether that is dark humour, retreating from company, seeking company, talking, resting, exercise, crying, laughing, feeling angry – however you deal with it, is OK - **as long as you deal with it!** It is your responsibility to understand and deal with your feelings and emotions, which means:

1. **Acknowledge them and practice self-care.** Don't worry, you just need to acknowledge it to yourself, you don't need to tell the world (although talking to someone is often helpful).

This could look like....

“I’ve just had a busy hotline shift and now, for some reason I feel really angry!” Mmmmm? This could be stress? Maybe I'll call my supervisor/mentor and talk it through, or journal, or go for a walk. All these things are examples of practising **Self-care**.

Or ...

“I’ve just been to a traumatic rescue, and I can’t stop crying”. This could be anger, sadness, trauma. Again – practice **Self-care**.

Or ...

“I have 5000 birds to feed, kids, work, husband!” That's a no-brainer really – stress, overwhelm! Again - practice **Self-care**.

2. **Know that it's ok!** Say to yourself - “it is **OK** that I feel like this! It's normal! Natural! This is to be expected under the circumstances!”
3. **If you would like to debrief/chat you can call someone.** The numbers for Lifeline and WildTalk are on the Wildcare website. Otherwise call a friend, fellow volunteer or a mentor.
4. **Now do something nice for yourself!** Whatever makes you feel good (not too much wine though or you'll end up feeling worse!). Go for a walk, swim or yoga class, read a novel, watch a movie. Make a list all the things that **nourish you** and have it somewhere handy so it's handy when you need it. This is **self-care**, please don't underestimate how important it is.
5. **Practice acceptance and kindness to yourself** - and then you can be there for the critters.
6. Remember the life-saving advice - **OXYGEN FOR YOU FIRST**.

What happens in your brain?

GIVING releases two times the amount of dopamine (our brains natural feel-good chemical) than receiving.

But **giving** can also lead to **compassion fatigue**.

Compassion fatigue can occur due to an accumulative effect of caring for wildlife and/or witnessing traumatic rescues. It can feel overwhelming and pointless sometimes when we see things happening repeatedly, without any change. It can make us feel helpless. It can also affect our enthusiasm.

Signs of compassion fatigue:

- not feeling - feeling numb or withdrawn
- crying - feeling overwhelmed
- not sleeping
- not caring anymore
- feeling angry
- feeling disillusioned - "what's the point?"

Preventions/self-care

Self-awareness. Being self-aware helps to prevent compassion fatigue because when you are self-aware you can recognise your feelings and emotions as they arise, and then you can accept them (even if you can't put a name to the feeling, simply acknowledging "ahhh....an uncomfortable feeling" and saying to yourself.. "it's ok to feel this").

Dealing with emotions and feelings as they arise rather than pushing them down and bottling them up sounds like hard work, but it can be as simple as just acknowledging the feeling. Paying attention to it as you would attend to a baby crying or an animal in pain, attend to your feelings.

Compassion fatigue is the end result of too much stress/sadness/anger that is ignored for too long.

Balance. This is always a tricky one. We tend to move in and out of balance. Being aware that your life is getting out of balance will help you to make choices that move you back to a better place.

Avoid vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is when you experience symptoms of trauma after being exposed to graphic pictures and/or stories of traumatic events. Don't look at graphic pictures or read stories on social media about traumatic incidents. We all know about the terrible things that happen and looking at this stuff has a negative impact on us.

Connection. Connect with friends, your pets, partners, colleagues and professional counsellors if that feels appropriate for you.

Journaling. Journaling is a powerful tool to use daily or whenever you feel like it. In your journal you can say anything – it is like having a counsellor but it's free! If you get all your feelings out by journaling, you'll feel much better, clearer and lighter.

Rest and play. Take time off. Really important! Relaxation, have fun with a friend, laugh, exercise, meditation, dancing (has been proven to help with post-traumatic stress), singing (puts our nervous system into parasympathetic mode – i.e. relaxes our brains). All of these can be done at home or with others in a class. Whatever makes you feel good.

Dump perfection. Don't try to be perfect, we all stuff up sometimes. It's human to make mistakes and courageous to admit it.

Treatment

If you do feel as though you're suffering from compassion fatigue, you need to take a break and do some serious self-nurturing.

Rest

Have fun

Relax

Think about talking to a professional counsellor along with your self-care and you'll be back on board before you know it.

In a nutshell:

Expect to have some uncomfortable feelings it's perfectly normal.

Practice self-awareness and self-care.

Whatever time you can give is greatly appreciated.

So come on! Our wild ones need you...