



Changing Your View

When you see red, try switching glasses

BY LAUREN GLICKMAN

Nearly every day, staff and volunteers working at animal shelters and rescues grapple with anger. Community attitudes toward animals can be infuriating. People surrender their dog because he's old; people yell because their outdoor cat has been impounded and they have to pay to reclaim him; and people just don't seem to value the lives of animals the way you do.

Anger is a natural response, but letting anger run away with you can have consequences—for the animals, the organization, and you. If you unleash your anger on the person presenting her cat's latest litter as "a donation," you can alienate supporters and cast the organization in a poor light—not to mention get reprimanded or fired.

Handling your anger well in the moment is tough. Some of us can have productive conversations when we are angry, but some of us really struggle. There is no easy fix, but with practice, you can learn to manage yourself well during difficult conversations. There are many resources available, from workshops to coaching, that can help you handle your anger better.

Over the long term, try out the techniques below when you are not angry so that you can access them when you are. (The key is to practice when the stakes are low.) Once you've integrated them into your routine, you will be better-equipped to effectively handle anger in the moment, and you'll be more likely to keep the anger you feel today from making you angry for days, months, and even years.

Feeling angry is more than just an emotional experience—it's physical. Remember your sympathetic nervous system and how it kicks into fight, flight, or freeze mode when you perceive a threat? When your sympathetic nervous system is triggered and you are experiencing high negative arousal, your adrenal glands flood your body with cortisol for a quick burst of energy. This is a good thing if you're hearing footsteps in a dark alley, but if you are constantly angry with no relief, you can do your body real harm.

What do you notice happening in your body during that first moment you get angry? What is your anger cue? Is it a pang in your gut? A tingle in your cheeks as they get hot? Whatever it is, consider it a gift, one that provides a chance to recognize a moment of choice. When you feel it, you can choose to react by doing what you usually do (blow up or shut down), or you could try something new. By becoming more aware of your body, you have the chance to let your parasympathetic nervous system govern your response as much as possible.

Thinking On Purpose

Close your eyes for a moment and think about the most joyful thing you can con-

jure—it could be a person, a memory, a place, or anything that fills you with joy. Spend a minute or two exploring it. What do you smell? What do you see? What is happening to your body as you focus on this joy?

Do you see what you just did? You directed your mind to a place that soothes the body. You can do this anytime you choose, and it *is* a choice: You always choose what to think about, even when it doesn't seem like it. How often do you allow your mind to dwell on things you cannot change? How many of these things make you feel angry, frustrated, and helpless?

It's crucial when doing this lifesaving work to direct your mind toward thoughts that help you feel good about it. This isn't to suggest that you shouldn't spend time grappling with the challenges in front of you—but you can spare yourself a lot of pain by being mindful of where you allow your thoughts to go.

Think about one of your worst and most difficult days. Maybe there was a parvo outbreak, and many dogs had to be euthanized. Maybe you admitted dogs from a puppy mill or hoarding case and witnessed severe abuse and neglect. Where did your mind go? Did you stew and sulk? Did you complain to anyone who would listen? How did your thoughts affect your mood and capacities at work?

Remember, anger is often justified, but there is a difference between being angry and staying in a constant state of high negative arousal. There are things you can do to focus in a new direction and give your body a break from anger.

Practice Gratitude

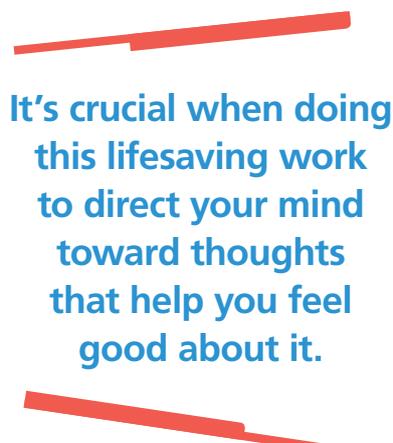
In order to guide yourself into a better mind-frame, you have to practice using your tools. Find a piece of paper and grab a pen, and make a list of the following things.

1. Three skills that make you a valuable member of your team at work
2. Three things you appreciate about the physical space in which you work

3. Three compliments your best friends would give you
4. Three ways you make life better for animals in your community

Sometimes it's hard to get started because we're not in the habit of thinking this way. We get into the habit of noticing and talking about the things that *aren't* going well, but this is an opportunity to begin creating new “think habits.”

Your list doesn't have to be filled with



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giant things; you could be grateful for things as simple as not having a toothache today, that you have air conditioning, or your delicious morning coffee. It helps your brain to spend time listing the good, rather than constantly rooting through the bad.

Here are some suggestions:

- If you're a morning person, first thing in the morning, write down five things you are grateful for.
- If you're more of a night owl, right before you go to bed, write down five things that went well that day.
- Do anonymous good deeds for your colleagues. Not only will you feel good about doing it, but adding that energy to your animal care environment will do wonders for everyone's emotional health.
- Set a reminder on your phone. When it goes off, stop and simply acknowledge something that is going well in that moment.

- Get a large stack of note cards. Write one thank-you note every day. Write to humans, animals, or inanimate objects. Write to the living or those who have died. (You don't *have* to mail the notes, but people might love it if you did!)

Breathe Deeply

One of the best ways to manage stress and anxiety can be done anywhere, at any time. We already know how to breathe, but *deep* breathing brings more oxygen into the body, which increases energy, improves circulation, and releases the body's endorphins, which are natural painkillers.

Try this: Sit comfortably with your shoulders relaxed and your hands in your lap. Exhale first, and then inhale through your nose till your lungs are full, and then exhale slowly to the count of five. When you have exhaled thoroughly, pause for the count of two and repeat. Experiment by letting your belly expand as you inhale, and by tensing up your belly muscles as you exhale. Try this 10 times in a row once or twice a day for a few weeks.

Sometimes it might feel impossible to find even a few minutes at work to sit and breathe this way, but it really can happen anywhere. If you can't sit, then stand. Do it in a break room, in a desk chair away from the commotion, while you're walking a dog, or at a picnic table outside in the sunshine. The important part is that you breathe.

You've now got several tools to help you regulate your body and help you manage your stress on a very practical level, but they won't work if you don't set up a plan for yourself. What are you going to try and when? The magic is in the practice.

In the next issue, we will explore our choice to make things around us better or worse, and how it relates to effective communication in the workplace. ■

For previous *Healthy Perspectives* articles, go to animalsheltering.org. Reach Lauren Glickman at lauren@forayconsulting.com.