

## Keeping Your Hero Afloat

Feeling dead inside? Self-soothing can help you function and turn you back into a human being.

BY LAUREN GLICKMAN

In the last issue of *Animal Sheltering*, we offered a new lens to help you view your experience. You can look at each day as a powerful statement that you believe the work you do is worth doing. You can embrace the notion that the challenges are the ones you're willing to grapple with in order to accomplish your goals. Recall both the positive and negative lists you made, and recall that these lists represent the entirety of your chosen work—the rewards and the hard stuff.

When you choose to be exactly where you are—and accept that your choice to be there includes choosing all the hard stuff as well—you can transform your entire experience in the trenches and avoid the numbness of compassion fatigue. But even when you take this stance, there are difficulties. Without dedication to mindfulness, intentionality, and self-care, these challenges can lead professionals in this field into a four-phase trajectory in which eager enthusiasm can turn to bitterness.

Take a look at the Hero to Zero Trajectory (adapted from Douglas Fakkema's essay, "The Four Phases").

### The Hero Phase (aka the Zealot Phase)

Often when we just start out, we have unending energy, we go the extra mile, and often do so without prompting. We are happy to serve and feel lucky to be in our new job. We have very few boundaries—we're happy to work late, we work through lunch, and even take foster animals home over the weekend.

### The Irritability Phase

The Irritability Phase begins when our bubble bursts and our enthusiasm starts to wane. We are still interested, but we might

begin to cut corners or begin to keep track of who is or isn't doing things right. We might start to avoid patient/client contact, and there may be certain tasks we begin to avoid. Behaviors can include mocking patients and clients, speaking unfairly about them, and using strained humor. We may also begin to distance ourselves from our friends and co-workers.

### The Withdrawal Phase

The Withdrawal Phase begins when our enthusiasm turns sour and we see some or all of our customers and colleagues as something to endure. The ability to see them as individuals is impaired, and they become blurred irritants. We may minimize contact with customers and colleagues at the expense of work quality, and we may get well-deserved complaints about our work. During this phase, many people neglect their family, co-workers, and their own well-being. We no longer want to talk about work and may actually lie to avoid real conversations about it. We are not able to find joy where we once found it.

### The Zero Phase (aka the Zombie Phase)

During the Zombie Phase, our sense of hopelessness can turn to rage and cynicism. We might feel hate toward people



in general and have zero tolerance if our co-workers dare to question us. We regard others as incompetent or ignorant, and we have no patience for the ordinary frustrations of day-to-day life. We lose our sense of humor and make no time for enjoyment. We are not fun to be around.

### The Good News

The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. You can choose between going down this road, which leads to suffering, physical illness, and eventual burnout, or you can choose a pathway in which you build your resiliency, validate your own worth, and take responsibility for managing your well-being. The latter provides you with the opportunity to experience the joy of making a huge difference in the lives of animals. It's not always easy, but it is worth pursuing.

One of the best ways to enhance your stress resiliency is to develop your ability to self-soothe in the face of the multiple and difficult challenges this work brings

us. To do this effectively, it is essential to develop a basic understanding of our own nervous system. In the most basic sense, there are two complementary parts of our nervous systems—the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. A quick lesson in the differences between them will help you develop your ability to self-soothe in a moment when you're upset.

In the simplest terms, our parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for regulating internal organs and glands, which control the “rest and digest” or “feed and breed” activities that occur when the body is relaxed and at rest. These systems are regulated unconsciously, and when this part of our nervous system is running the show, we are calm and have many options for being intentional and for responding creatively to whatever presents itself.

Our sympathetic nervous system is the part of our nervous system that becomes engaged when we perceive a threat. This is what is often referred to as the “fight or flight” (or freeze) response. When we are threatened (or simply *perceive* a threat), we are limited to these responses, and our ability to be creative is severely restricted, because our body feels it is responding to an emergent situation that requires a lifesaving response—such as quick bursts of energy, numbing of pain, and dilated pupils for better vision.

Note the emphasis above on the word “perceive.” Most often, the threats our bodies respond to are not actually threats to our lives. Think about what gets you most stressed out in your job. Interactions with unreasonable people? Administrative policies, or a lack thereof? Limited resources? In fact, our sympathetic nervous system can be triggered by the threat of being called wrong,

## Resources

Check out parts one and two of the webinar “A Return to Heart Health” at [heartmath.com/webinars/warner-hubbell-webinar-form.html](http://heartmath.com/webinars/warner-hubbell-webinar-form.html) and [heartmath.com/webinars/warner-hubbell2-webinar-form.html](http://heartmath.com/webinars/warner-hubbell2-webinar-form.html).

being blamed, not getting our way—things that can happen nearly any day of our working lives. Most often it's not a true physical threat to our lives ... and yet physiologically, we often respond as if it is.

When our sympathetic nervous system is engaged, we are less articulate and less creative, and our bodies are flooded with a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is a very useful hormone when we are faced with a serious threat—it gives us a huge boost of energy to avoid the danger we're facing. The problem is that when we constantly perceive threats all around us, our bodies are constantly flooded with cortisol.

This can have serious consequences for

our health and well-being. (If you want to learn more about stress and your body's response, check out the webinars referenced at left.)

You can help yourself move into a state where your parasympathetic nervous system is running the show through a variety of techniques. For example, one technique involves “unclenching” your pelvic floor. It may sound odd, but the state of this core area makes a big difference. Try this: Sit on a chair with both feet on the floor. Touch your hip bones and notice where they are. Now touch your “sit” bones (the bones under the flesh of the butt you're sitting on). Now that you've located them, imagine those four points creating a rectangle of space in your body. This is where your pelvic floor is located and that's the part of your body that you will relax with this exercise. Take all your focus and energy and inhale as you clench up as tight as you possibly can for about five seconds. Then unclench and deeply exhale. Do not clench tightly again, but with every exhale deepen the release of your pelvic floor muscles.

The key is to practice this when you're not feeling threatened or triggered, so that you will be able to use the technique when you actually need to stay calm. Set a reminder for yourself once a day to practice this when you're not upset. This is where you start to positively influence yourself, so that you can stay healthy and happy for the long haul.

In the next issue of *Animal Sheltering*, we will explore several other self-soothing techniques that you can employ—one of the most important aspects of defeating your inner zombie. ■

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