

## **On the Positive Side: Like humans, animals that experience trauma can be helped**

**Sun-News report**

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This week began with a fire at the Las Cruces Sun-News. A quick-thinking and calm city editor responded to the emergency, checked for people in the building, and incidentally arranged press coverage. For the rest of us, seeing the tall pillar of black smoke was a reminder that everyday calamities can threaten our animals as well as ourselves. This week's column explores the aftereffects of trauma on animals and ways of correcting these effects.

The word trauma is applied to catastrophic events that leave a permanent deleterious effect or disability. Traumas can be large-scale natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, affecting whole populations. Traumas can also be everyday tragedies: a house fire, a wildfire, an auto accident. The resulting post-traumatic stress defines a persistent, debilitating anxiety disorder.

Public awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder in humans (PTSD) has become widespread since the war in Vietnam. Symptoms of PTSD include impulsive aggressivity, impaired memory and learning, "flashbacks," difficulty in adapting to new environments, hypervigilance and/or overreaction to stimuli like thunder, gunshots or sirens. Experiencing trauma affects the way the brain develops and functions.

Many mammalian species can experience the emotional terror that results from intense threat on a primal level. The trauma can involve actual attack or pain, but can also result from witnessing violence or horror. Trauma survivors showing some or all of these symptoms are found among animals adopted from shelters, elephants in captivity, laboratory chimps and bomb-sniffing dogs furloughed from the armed services.

A qualified veterinarian can be your first line of defense if your pet shows signs of post-traumatic stress. There are also animal behaviorists who specialize in reconditioning or counterconditioning particular symptoms. Suggested interventions specifically target different aspects of the disorder. Thus, if "learned helplessness" is a result of trauma, some therapeutic practices aim to build a sense of agency (self-in-control). The feeling of no control can also be mitigated by creating a structured home environment with reliable routines. Using rewards or treats in behavioral training is something the pet owner can do herself. In a case study of Gina, a bomb-sniffing dog returned from Iraq, trainers identified specific behaviors (such as refusing to go through doorways) they wanted to eliminate. They planted friendly faces Gina knew on the other side of a doorway, then immediately rewarded and petted Gina when she ventured through. In some cases anxiety medication can help traumatized animals. To challenge the hypervigilance of traumatized animals, techniques aimed at bringing about relaxation may help. Some therapists recommend therapeutic touch as a treatment.

Therapists emphasize that there's also a wrong way to "help" your traumatized pet: giving comfort or treats when he is exhibiting the dysfunctional behavior may "enable" the very behavior you're trying to eliminate. The vets' advice is to play to the animal's strength, not its weakness.

Many conditions of abuse, abandonment or mistreatment can constitute trauma for an animal. Current research shows that ordinary treatment suffered by captive elephants adds up to torture. The stoical giants suffer an early and sustained separation from their herd, and are isolated from elephant society for most of their life. They are restricted by chains, and "trained" with physical beatings. They experience complete lack of control over the conditions of their life, even to irregular or inadequate feeding.

If your pet is an adoptee or a stray, you probably know little about its history before coming to you. Experiencing injury, homelessness, neglect or abuse can constitute trauma for a cat or dog. An animal that has been abandoned

suffers broken attachment in addition to fear and hunger. An animal that has witnessed domestic violence can be prey to extreme fears. One that has been chained or caged experiences helplessness or lack of control. Surviving a fire, accident or natural catastrophe can leave psychic scars as well as physical ones. Fortunately, both can be healed.

Dr. Judy Long is a retired professor of sociology and a Board member of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.