

What Shelters Owe Traumatized Animals

BEFORE



AFTER

A Publication of The No Kill Advocacy Center



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THE NO KILL ADVOCACY CENTER defines “irremediable suffering” as an animal “who has a poor or grave prognosis for being able to live without severe, unremitting pain even with prompt, necessary, and comprehensive veterinary care,” such as animals in fulminant organ system failure. But some shelters have suggested that the definition is too narrow as it does not allow for mental suffering.

Several years ago, for example, the ASPCA authored legislation in New York which would have allowed shelters to kill animals, with no holding period of any kind, if those animals were deemed to be in “psychological pain.” The killing of these animals, it was argued, was morally justified because it was ostensibly being done in their best interest. Even if we assume this was not dissimulation, although it most certainly was, the argument rested on a premise that has never been properly vetted—whether or not there is such a thing as “irremediable psychological suffering.” Moreover, there were no standards on how the shelter would make that determination, no objective

measures on how it should be applied, no mandatory training or credentials on the part of the staff to do so.

Under the ASPCA-sponsored bill, if any two shelter employees—including the janitor, the receptionist, or a kennel attendant—believed that an animal was in “psychological pain,” that animal could have been killed immediately, before the animal’s family came to look for him, indeed, before anyone even knew he was missing. In essence, this bill was designed to allow for the killing of animals by people unqualified to make such a determination, and in the absence of any measurable, objective criteria to do so.

Since then, others have tried to do similar things in other states. But even if the bill (and subsequent ones) did not have these procedural defects; if it had been written with more rigor—strict criteria, mandated training of personnel, tested tools and evaluation strategies, the involvement of people who understand the science of animal behavior and have an in depth knowledge of the data, the concurrence of a veterinarian board certified in

It is impossible to imagine a scenario in which one human being could confidently claim that another human being is suffering a level of “psychological pain” so severe as to justify ending that person’s life without their consent. Yet that is precisely what is done to traumatized animals in many shelters.

behavior medicine—would that change the primary defect? Can dogs, cats, and other animals be so traumatized that they should not be—indeed would not want to be—alive? In short, is there such a thing as “irremediable psychological suffering”? No. There is no such thing as an animal who is irremediably psychologically or behaviorally suffering. There is no such thing as an animal who is so traumatized that he wants to die.*

The view that animals can experience irremediable psychological suffering not only flies in the face of every living being’s instinctive will to live, but an animal’s own reaction to the perception that she may be in harm’s way—which is not to run *towards* a threat to her life, but to flee it or display aggression as a means of deterring it. In fact, humans are the only species in which suicide is documented (and even then, suicide is not performed or sanctioned by the medical community as a means of addressing a diagnosis of irremediable psychological suffering). It, therefore, does not make sense to respond to trauma or fear in an animal by doing the very thing a traumatized animal’s behavior demonstrates they are desperately trying to avoid: *being harmed*.

Indeed, it is impossible to imagine any scenario in which one human being could confidently say another human being suffering “psychological pain” would be better off dead and feel justified in ending that person’s life, especially without that person’s consent as is done for animals. Such conditions are simply not regarded as “irremediable” or a death sentence. Instead, when confronted with people suffering psychological trauma, the response is to seek a remedy to help

* This is true even if their behavioral pathology is endogenous and profound because there is redress.



Animals, no matter how traumatized, do not run towards a threat to their life but flee it or display aggression as a means of deterring it. It is illogical, and more importantly, unethical, to “help” animals by doing to them the very thing their behavior demonstrates they are desperately seeking to avoid.

them no longer feel that way. There does not seem to be a justification for a different standard for animals.

When veterinarians speak of “irremediable physical suffering,” moreover, they have objective measures; baseline values against which to compare any lab or pathology data and experience with medications or other medical intervention which have been attempted. In other words, prompt, necessary, and comprehensive veterinary care has failed, the condition is beyond medicine’s ability to care for or manage, and the animal is suffering severe, unremitting pain. Psychological suffering fails on these counts. While there are some objective measures—skin conductance, heart rate and blood pressure, salivary cortisol levels, and even stereotypical behaviors—at best, these measure *current* mental state, not future behavior or, more accurately, “resilience,” the successful adaptation

and recovery from the experience of severe adversity. *At worse*, these measures are meaningless, especially if there are no baselines for the individual animal, which there almost never are in the shelter environment. The end result is that there are simply no objective measures to make an adequate determination as to the degree of psychological suffering. And shelter personnel and the veterinary community in general are not qualified to do so in the absence of objective criteria.* In fact, in no other sub-discipline do veterinarians make medical determinations without data.

Moreover, even if an animal is suffering psychologically and even if it were determined, with certainty, that some mental scars would always remain and the animal will always need some level of protection or care consistent with the behavioral expression of those scars, this doesn’t mean that she cannot recover to a point of happiness and good

* Indeed, current temperament testing regimes for dogs, including the two most commonly used ones in shelters, have been found to have no more validity than a coin toss in predicting aggression, which is a narrower range of behavior and which we can actually see.

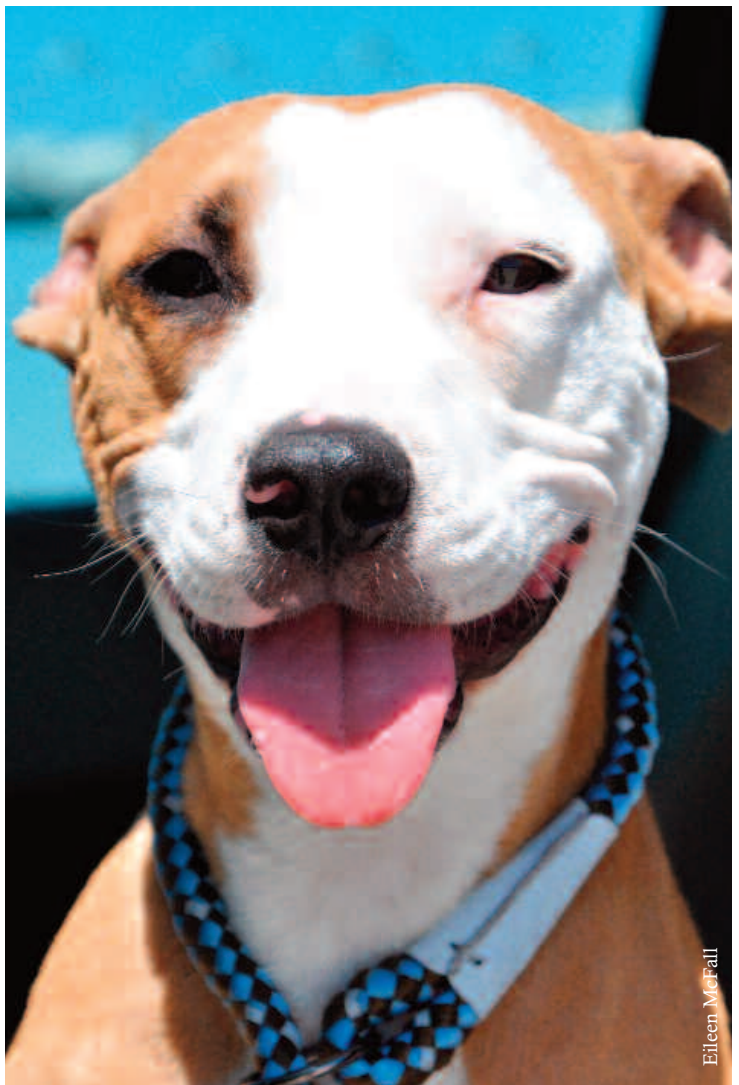


quality of life.

In fact, a lot of people live with traumatic psychological scars successfully. Studies on human resilience show that social support, with an emphasis on positive emotions, is a strong buffer against post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological problems. Indeed, social support can result in successful adaptation and recovery after experiencing severe adversity, increasing both the speed of recovery and level of mental health and well-being. According to one analysis, “human studies clearly show that an extended social network and positive experiences are important factors contributing to resilience.” Similarly, “[animal] research using environmental enrichment strategies, i.e. using social housing with plenty of opportunities for play, has suggested an important role for social contact and positive experiences in resilience to social defeat.” The three core experiences associated with recovery are forming a secure attachment, positive emotions, and purpose in life. For animals, this means a loving, new home.

Depending on the severity of the condition, there may also be a need for behavioral rehabilitation protocols and even drug therapy. In extreme cases, where the animal is tormented or, in the case of a dog who poses a direct and immediate risk to public safety, there may be a need for a sanctuary environment, with the understanding that a sanctuary should not be

Shelters must reject the notion that death itself is a “treatment” option and that it doesn’t harm animals, even though such a view is endemic to sheltering, to the “animal protection” industry in general, and to many in the veterinary community. For those animals who are not mortally, physically suffering, killing is the ultimate harm.





With the right amount of love, kindness, compassion, positive conditioning, and, when necessary, veterinary intervention, psychologically wounded animals, like humans, have a remarkable capacity for resilience.

seen as a place where one gives up on animals with extreme trauma. Instead, sanctuaries should be seen as an environment where the animal is protected during long-term rehabilitation and barring that, provided permanent placement that meets the needs of the individual for life.

Rejecting the notion of irremediable psychological suffering does not mean that animals cannot undergo profound psychological suffering; only that it can never rise to the level of being a death sentence. Said one shelter worker, “I met countless dogs and cats who had survived unimaginable cruelty: they were used to fight or used as ‘bait’ in fights, starved to shockingly skeletal states, set on fire. When I would visit the animals on my lunch hour, though, I would often see dogs wag their broken, bandaged tails when I walked into the kennel room, malnourished dogs who would look up from their bowls of food to play bow and lick my hand. Of course, dogs are not alone in

their capacity for forgiveness. I will never forget the cat I saw who had been set on fire. When I walked into the room, he rubbed his raw skin against the bars of his cage just at the sight of me, a stranger to him, purring and eager to be touched.”

What do we owe the neediest animals who arrive in our shelters looking for a second chance? We owe

them a safe harbor and time—time to abandon fear, to forget a haunted past, and most important of all, to learn that humans can be trusted after all. Indeed, with the right amount of love, kindness,

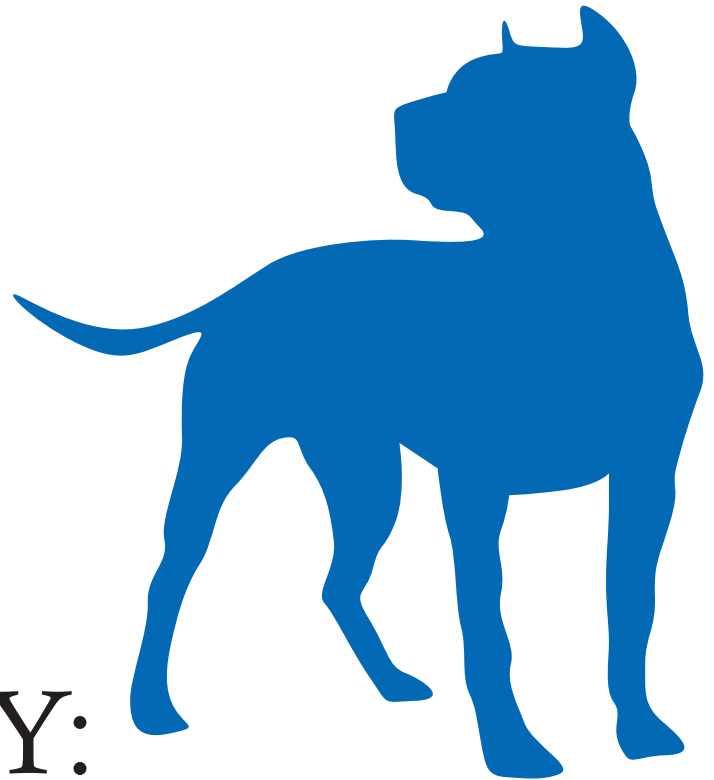
compassion, positive conditioning, and, when necessary, veterinary intervention, psychologically wounded animals, like humans, have a remarkable capacity for resilience.

The placement and treatment criteria for traumatized animals should depend on the severity of the duress:

1. The animal can go to a home;
2. The animal needs some rehabilitation and then can go to a home;
3. The animal has special needs and requirements that require knowledge;
4. The animal has special needs that require longer-term rehabilitation and/or drugs;
5. The animal needs long term help and sanctuary.



There is no more profound example of our movement's need to bring greater rigor to the historical assumptions upon which the treatment of traumatized dogs have depended than the victims of Michael Vick. Vick didn't just kill dogs; he terrorized them. In one case, he took a dog and hung him by the neck "by placing a nylon cord over a 2x4 that was nailed to two trees located next to the big shed." When the dog didn't die, Vick put on the pair of overalls he wore when he did not want to get blood from the dogs on his expensive tailored suits, and drowned the dog in a 5 gallon bucket of water. He took a second dog that would not die from hanging and tossed the dog to the side, later hanging him again, this time until he did die. Even when some of his co-conspirators wanted to give away dogs who would not fight rather than kill



CASE STUDY: The Michael Vick Dogs

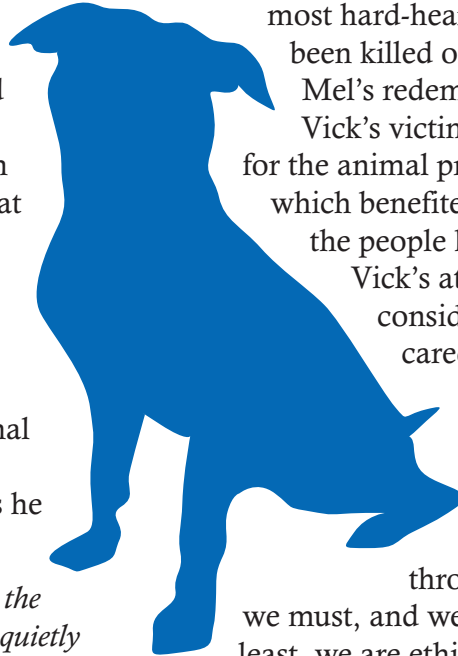
A better and ethically consistent future in animal sheltering inevitably awaits us if the No Kill movement can continue to do what it has always done until every last animal entering our nation's shelters—whatever the species, whatever the challenge—no longer faces killing: overcome the flawed but mutable traditions we have inherited from prior generations. The sooner we recognize the need for change and further innovation, the sooner we will find the motivation and tools to bring that brighter future into reality.

them, Vick refused, stating “they got to go,” meaning the dogs needed to be killed. Vick beat dogs to death. He watched dogs drown in his swimming pool, he shot them, he electrocuted them, he buried them alive, he savagely abused them, he took great enjoyment in it, and he found it funny to watch family pets being torn apart. The survivors were the very epitome of “traumatized;” of being in “psychological pain” and of “mental suffering.”

After Vick was reinstated into the National Football League, the *Los Angeles Times* published the story of Mel, one of the dogs he savagely abused:

While Michael Vick was screaming toward the sky, a black pit bull named Mel was standing quietly by a door. On this night, like many other nights, Mel was waiting for his owners to take him outside, but he couldn't alert them with a bark. He doesn't bark. He won't bark. The bark has been beaten out of him. While Michael Vick was running for glory, Mel was cowering toward a wall. Every time the 4-year-old dog meets a stranger, he goes into convulsions. He staggers back into a wall for protection. He lowers his face and tries to hide. New faces are not new friends, but old errors. While Michael Vick was officially outracing his past Monday night, one of the dogs he abused cannot.

Thankfully, Mel and the others were not killed, though some organizations, like the Humane Society of the United States and PETA, lobbied unsuccessfully for that outcome. Today, Mel goes on car rides and sleeps on the pillow with his person. He socializes with other dogs, is loved, and loves back. His recovery may not be complete, indeed it may never be, but only the



most hard-hearted would say he should have been killed or would be better off dead.

Mel's redemption, like dozens of other of Vick's victims, was a watershed moment for the animal protection movement and one which benefited far more than the dogs. For the people haunted by the memories of Vick's atrocities, there is great solace to consider that such dogs are now cared for, protected, and experiencing the best, rather than the worst, humanity can offer them.

Can we save all the “Mels” humans created through their misdeeds? We can, we must, and we eventually will. At the very least, we are ethically obligated to try. Aspiring to that outcome for every animal should be the goal of the No Kill movement, so that even when results at treatment are not immediately forthcoming, we provide the environment where such animals can live their lives safely and free of torment, hoping that time and our unrelenting commitment to their well-being might still someday succeed in their full rehabilitation.

The No Kill Advocacy Center would like to thank Dr. Karen Overall and Dr. Jessica Pierce for their invaluable assistance with this guide. Cover photo by Eileen McFall.



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