

Human-Animal Bond Considerations During Disasters
by
Caroline B. Schaffer, DVM
Assistant Professor and Director,
Center for the Study of Human-Animal Interdependent Relationships
School of Veterinary Medicine
Tuskegee University
Tuskegee, AL 36088
schaffertusvm@yahoo.com

Abstract

With the significant changes in the status of animals in the United States, recognition of the impact of their well being on the physical and mental health of the people who care for them is also changing. Disaster responders are faced with dilemmas and the need for split-second decisions when trying to save the lives of people who are strongly attached to their animals. Disasters in the recent past spotlight the difficulty of rescuing people when the animals whom they consider to be part of their family are also in need of rescuing. This lecture will help emergency responders better understand the tasks they are facing by looking at human-animal bond considerations during disasters.

An animal is rescued after a disaster and his owners search and search until that tearful reunion. Another animal is rescued and his owners never even look for him.

One person flees his home with his pets as soon as a disaster warning is called. Another chooses to stay in his home with his pets. Yet another leaves his home and his pets and never looks back.

A disaster responder looks the other way as a person tucks his beloved pet under his coat. Another disaster responder threatens to shoot the person's pet if he will not leave his pet at home. Yet another stops the bus, snatches the cowering pet from its owner, and pushes the pet onto the desolate highway to fend for itself.

Why the differences? What makes some people cling to their pets and others not? Why do some risk their own lives to save a non-human animal's life? Why do some disaster responders follow orders to save people but not their pets and others find a way to rescue the pet as well as its owner?

The popular term "human-animal bond" which is really human-animal interdependent relationships helps explain the differences. Disaster responders who know the dynamics of the human-animal interdependent relationship will be better able to understand the challenges of

rescuing people and their animals (Heath, 1999). Although each people-animal relationship is unique, common themes surface when studying disaster responses and recoveries.

Definition of the Human-Animal Bond

The American Veterinary Medical Association's Committee on the Human-Animal Bond defines the human-animal bond as, " a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment." (JAVMA, 1998)

Scientists have attempted to understand the theoretical basis for this bond by looking at the nature and function of the relationship. Four noteworthy theories relevant to the dynamics witnessed during disasters are (1) pet attachment, (2) commitment to pets, (3) pets as a source of social support, and (4) pets as self objects.

Pet Attachment

With attachment, the person is said to have a close relationship with a specific animal based on feelings of comfort, security, and affection. These feelings give the person psychological benefits even if the animal receives no benefits and exhibits no awareness of an attachment to the person. These feelings of security/insecurity influence the person's social behavior and relationships of various types. The animal is important as a unique individual. The tie between person and animal may be maintained during absences, but there is a desire to come together and pleasure in doing so. Because of the affectional aspects of the tie, separation will cause distress and loss will cause grief. Attempts to quantify pet attachment include the CENSHARE Pet Attachment Survey (Holcombe, Williams, & Richards, 1985), Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (Johnson, Garrity, & Stallones, 1992), Inventory of Pet Attachment (Andrews, 1992), and the Companion Animal Bonding Scale (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson). Questions in the surveys include where the animal sleeps in relation to the person and other proximity questions. Samples of the questions asked appear in Appendix A as a "Modified Pet Attachment Scale."

Perhaps the term pet attachment has evolved from a misunderstanding or misapplication of human attachment theory (Collis & McNicholas, 1998). It is, nevertheless, the term assigned to a relationship that does exist between some, but not all, people and animals. Thus, it is useful in understanding the dilemmas disaster responders face when trying to save the lives of people and their animals.

Commitment to Pets

Looking at the commitment people have for their pets is another approach to explaining the strong bond between people and animals. In this case, commitment is defined as a resolve to keep a pet in spite of challenges that require expenditures of personal resources. In the Miller-Rada Commitment to Pets Scale (Staats, Miller, Carnot, Rada, & Turner, 1996), researchers examined how severe a behavior problem or illness would have to be and how much investment

of time, work, and money it would take before a person would relinquish a dog or cat. The scale asked pet owners to look at how much they would give to a particular animal rather than how much they would receive from that animal. Some people may save the life of an animal because of a commitment to that animal rather than an emotional attachment for the animal.

Ten questions appear in Appendix B from the “Miller-Rada Commitment to Pets Scale.”

Social Support

A third theory looks at the support a person receives from a particular animal (Collis & McNicholas, 1998). Social support is said to act as an important buffer to threats to mental health from stressors. Major stressful life events can repeatedly increase the incidence of adverse physical and psychological responses, thereby resulting in illness, depression, etc. As a provider of social support, pets may be perceived as always available, predictable in their responses, and nonjudgmental. People may gain self-esteem from the belief that a particular animal cares about them and needs them, regardless of how they or other people perceive them to be. Animals may also provide support by giving tactile comfort and recreational distraction from worries; thereby providing a consistent source of support regardless of what they receive in return.

For some people, the presence of support from an animal may alleviate or alter stress responses. Without social support, a person may have feelings of isolation and loneliness that exacerbate existing stresses and predispose to further stresses. To be effective, the support must match the specific needs of the person and must be consistent. The relationship must be perceived as being supportive by the person regardless of how supportive or well-intentioned it really is. Neither the animal nor the others observing the person need to agree that the animal is being supportive.

Pets as Self Objects

The application of self-psychology, a psychoanalytically oriented theory of human psychology, to human-animal relationships provides further insight into the differences in the bond between people and their pets (Brown, 2004, 2007). An animal is considered to be a selfobject when it gives and maintains cohesion to a person’s sense of self. To be a selfobject, the individual person’s inner psychological experience must be held together by that particular animal. People may experience one of three different types of relationships. Mirroring selfobjects build the self by providing acceptance and affirmation of the goodness of self. Idealized selfobjects provide someone to look up to, identify with, and admire for their strength, calmness, wisdom, or goodness. Twinship selfobjects sustain the self by providing an essential likeness or understanding of another’s self by a communion with each other or a feeling of oneness.

Regardless of the type of selfobject, the animal can: (1) increase self esteem and self-cohesion, (2) keep people calm and soothed, (3) make people feel understood, valued, and loved, (4) give people the feeling of being deeply connected to another being, and (5) give people a vibrancy for life. The loss or anticipation of the loss of an animal who functions as a self object can be completely devastating to a person. A person separated from an animal who is a selfobject may feel a sense of emptiness, depression, or disintegration until reunited with that animal. Given the

internal turmoil that is possible, it is understandable that disaster evacuees will strongly resist leaving behind an animal who is a self object. Not all animals are selfobjects. It is possible to feel protected by, enjoy the company of, be amused by, or even love an animal and yet not have a selfobject relationship. The animal must be crucial to the integrity of the person's self structure. As with social support, whether or not the animals actually feel what people think they feel does not matter.

Livestock and Poultry

Even livestock and poultry producers toil with mental health issues before, during, and after a disaster. They, too, have a special bond with their animals. Many cannot separate what happens to their farm from what happens to their family (Heath, 1999). All face the potential loss of income, animal deaths, and illnesses. Some face the loss of a genetic pool that took many generations to achieve. Some dairy farmers name their special cows and become bonded with them because of their close interactions in the milking parlor every morning and evening. The crisis from the massive slaughter of cattle in the United Kingdom due to Foot and Mouth disease shows the emotional struggle of people who invested their lives into raising livestock. Many producers and their families, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and volunteers needed professional counseling and emotional support from their community (Hall, Ng, Ursano, Holloway, Fullerton, & Casper, 2004).

Grief from Death and Losses

When dealing with a loss or impending loss, each person's grief is different, but the same. The grief from the death of a person as described by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (Kubler-Ross, 1969) has been shown to be the same as the grief from the death or loss of an animal. She described the stages as anger, denial, bargaining, grief, and acceptance. She discovered that all people will go through these stages in no particular order and with no particular timeline. Within a family, one person may be in one stage while another person is in a different stage. By knowing that these stages are normal and knowing that people experiencing the loss of an animal during a disaster will go through these five stages, disaster responders can be more empathic.

Grief counselors know from experience that the grief from knowing a pet is dead or being separated and not knowing the pet's fate can be as great as when a human loved one dies. Sometimes the grief is even greater. A person cannot "get over it" by being told, "It is just a cat." Disaster responders and volunteers are vulnerable to the same feelings of grief. They, too, will need to seek help and recognize that their feelings are normal.

Applying the Bond

Disaster responders will be more effective before, during, and after disasters when they understand the interdependent relationship between people and animals. Making time to consider the human-animal bond will enhance their ability to perform the stressful tasks they face. This knowledge will aid them when they must make split-second decisions when trying to save the lives of people who are strongly attached to their animals. They will be more effective

when they can identify the needs of evacuees regarding the pets, livestock, and other animals for whom they feel various degrees of attachment.

Disaster responders have a huge task now that Hurricane Katrina spotlighted the public's concern for the safety of animals as well as people. The numbers were staggering. According to *Dark Water Rising: the Truth about Katrina Animal Rescue* (Shiley, 2006), 50,000-100,000 pets were stranded in New Orleans. Eighty to 90% (40,000-90,000) of the pets died. Ten thousand to 15,000 were rescued. Of those rescued, 2,000-3,000 were reunited with their owners and 8,000 to 12,000 were adopted or are awaiting adoption." Reportedly thousands of people who were unable to take their pets with them refused to evacuate their homes. Estimates vary. Many stray animals may be included in the category of "pets." Nevertheless, the disregard for and also the strength of the human-animal bond were visible to the entire world.

In response to the disregard for the human-animal bond during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the US Congress approved and President George W. Bush signed into law the Federal Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) act on October 6, 2006. The law guarantees the inclusion of companion animals, assistance animals, and pet owners in disaster preparedness planning. States that do not comply will not be eligible for federal disaster funds (FEMA, 2007).

The Future

PETS is a great step forward, but the safety of animals and people is still in the hands of the communities and the people who live with and care for companion animals, livestock, and other animals not covered by the PETS Act. Disaster responders may not be able to single-handedly put into place local, state, or federal regulations, but they will be able to individually and as a group apply their insights into the human-animal interdependent relationship. Actions to care for the animals at all four stages of emergency management, i.e. mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery, as described by Dr. Sebastian Heath (Heath, 1999) are appropriate for the health and well being of the animals as well as the people who care for them and the disaster responders

Every disaster, whether it is large or small, natural or man-made, teaches lessons for the next disaster. As Attorney Alle Phillips wrote about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, "It took a horrific disaster to remind us that all life is precious and that no one, not even a pet, should be left behind." (Phillips, 2006)

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Modified Pet Attachment Scale

How many pets do you own? _____

Circle the number representing your degree of agreement

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

- 1 2 3 4 5 I meet new people because of my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet is more bother than it is worth.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet helps me get through tough times.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I wish I did not have a pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 There are times I'd be lonely without my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet gives me a reason for getting up in the morning.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet knows when I'm upset and tries to comfort me.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet helps me to be more physically active.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I feel committed and responsible for the care of my pet.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I miss my pet when I am away from home.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I do not intend to get another pet in the future.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My pet is like a member of the family.

Miller-Rada Commitment to Pets Scale

For the following questions, please circle the number representing your degree of agreement.

1 = strongly agree 2 = agree 3 = neutral 4 = disagree 5 = strongly disagree

1 2 3 4 5 If a pet destroyed a \$50 piece of furniture or personal item, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a pet destroyed a \$4000 piece of furniture or personal item, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a young pet required extensive veterinary care, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If an old pet required extensive veterinary care, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a three-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a six-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If an adult dog or cat were having problems with housebreaking, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a three-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with destructiveness, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If a six-month-old puppy or kitten were having problems with destructiveness, I would get rid of it.

1 2 3 4 5 If an adult dog or cat were having problems with destructiveness, I would get rid of it.