Animal Depopulation Resiliency Check-in Tool

Five-Step Resiliency Tool

Directions: These questions can be used **1)** individually as a journaling tool, **2)** as a discussion guide for "check-in friends," or **3)** as a discussion guide for a daily or weekly team check-in. Participation in the use of this tool should be voluntary. If someone decides to be present but quiet during a team check-in, that is all right. If someone chooses not to participate at all, please ensure they have the 5-step process to do independently as well as information for accessing mental health care.

Question 1: **Please share if there is anything you cannot shake right now? What is it? What do you remember about it?**

Question 2: **Can you think of what you have DONE RIGHT in that situation-even the smallest thing counts (or any recent situation if there was no response to Q1)?**

Question 3: **Is there anything you wish you had done differently?**

Question 4: **Is there anything you have learned or need to adjust for tomorrow or next time?**

Question 5: **Is there anything you feel grateful for or made you laugh in this situation (or in your recent past)?**

Please give us feedback on your experience using this Resiliency Check-in Tool by following this QR code:

This is a 5-item resiliency check-in tool that can be used by veterinarians and other animal-related professionals who are preparing for, participating in, and recovering from animal depopulation. These questions have been developed by an experienced veterinary social worker who has been implementing check-ins in the veterinary medical field for 20 years. For animal depopulation use, these questions have been reviewed by 3 doctoral level traumatology experts as well as by several food animal veterinary medical professionals.

This tool is designed to provide credible and attuned social support and self assessment. The use of peer support among professionals experiencing the same stressor has been shown to be an effective tool in protecting mental health.[1,2] The peer approach is important because it establishes credible social support. Peer support is "credible" because the individual offering support has lived experience with the stressor being addressed. Having an outside facilitator or mental health professional use traditional debrief tools (such as critical incident stress debriefing) has demonstrated iatrogenic effects.[3,4] Peer support can provide an alternative way to protect the mental health of professionals exposed to traumatic stress.[1]

Although credibility is important, that alone can also create iatrogenic effects if the peer connection only includes reliving a trauma, simple complaining about the experience, or a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" type of advice giving support. To help the social support avoid iatrogenesis, these questions are designed to guide animal professionals through a specific 5-step socio-emotionally attuned traumatic growth process. Attunement means that the process invites professionals to share their experience in such a way that helps connect them with their own and others authentic experience and positive coping in managing animal depopulation. The steps are predictable, replicable, and can be implemented by animal-related professionals themselves. The use of lay person public health approaches to help individuals facing a mental health challenge recognize it and get support accessing help is a growing approach to meet mental health needs.[5]

Following is a description of each question in the 5-step process including the keywords and rationale behind the use of the question.

Question #1 (keywords: intrusive thoughts, rumination, and social support)

Q1 Please share if there is anything you cannot shake right now? What is it? What do you remember about it?

Rationale: This question invites individuals to put into words any experience that is causing intrusive thoughts and rumination. Intrusive thoughts are unwanted images or memories of a stressful event. Rumination is the circular repetition of these unpleasant thoughts. These are typical experiences when someone is experiencing traumatic stress. An important skill in managing this is to "name" what the event is and connect that to emotions that occur in relation to the event. If answered in a dyad or group, this "storytelling" allows others to normalize the experience and feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences. Importantly, this question **invites** someone to share, but does not assume they had such an experience or want to share it. Individuals may or may not have an answer to this question and may or may not wish to answer it publicly. It is essential to respect an individual's self-determination on what and if to share answers to this question.

Question #2 (keywords: coping and self-efficacy)

Q2 Can you think of what you have DONE RIGHT in that situation-even the smallest thing counts (or any recent situation if there was no response to Q1)?

Rationale: When someone is going through a stressful event, once it is acknowledged by Q1, inviting them to focus on how they are coping well is important. This question helps the individual recognize the ways in which they are demonstrating self-efficacy and positive intention in the midst of a difficult circumstance. Research indicates that attending to evidence of positive personal behaviors is helpful even if one thinks of a circumstance NOT related to the current stressor (as would be the case if there was no answer to Q1).[6]

Questions #3 and #4 (keywords: coping, self-efficacy, and problem-solving)

Q3 Is there anything you wish you had done differently?

Q4 Is there anything you have learned or need to adjust for tomorrow or next time?

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Rationale: When individuals can learn from their stressful experiences it promotes a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy. These questions also help a person engage active problem solving to avoid being simply overwhelmed by the stressor. They help individuals use their experience to change strategies and keep growing as an animal professional. Moreover these questions invite practical problem-solving so that the individual may be more successful when they face the situation again.

Question #5 (keywords: gratitude, humor, and professional identity)

Q5 Is there anything you feel grateful for or made you laugh in this situation (or in your recent past)?

Rationale: Research in the field of positive psychology has demonstrated that attending to gratitude can have a positive impact on mental health.[7] Moreover, gratitude is also present for those with higher resiliency from traumatic stress.[8,9] Although the use of humor in times of tragedy is very dependent on individual preferences and traits, there is some evidence that it helps in cultivating an authentic professional identity.[10] This question allows professionals to choose which type of positive emotion to connect with that will be most personally helpful.

How to use the tool

Individually: This tool can be used individually by anyone who seeks to monitor their well-being throughout a depopulation experience. To do this, an individual can use this as a writing prompt tool. Writing as a way to mitigate traumatic stress and promote post traumatic growth is evidenced in the research literature.[11–13]

Dyadically: This tool can be used as part of a dyadic "check-in friend" system that an individual sets up in preparation for a depopulation event. The "check-in friend" dyad would meet periodically, in person, by phone, or on a web meeting, and answer the questions together and share responses as a way to establish credible socio-emotionally attuned support before, during, and after the depopulation event. The dyad can determine the frequency based on their own schedules and availability.

As a team: This tool can be used as a daily or weekly team check-in to establish and prioritize credible and socio-emotionally attuned support. Each member can be encouraged but not required to attend. If in attendance, each member can share or not share. Each person should be allotted about 7 minutes to share responses to the questions. It would be helpful to print out the tool and have copies on hand.

Additional considerations

If someone is consistently unable to identify and connect with positive feelings at the end of the 5-step process, it would be appropriate to encourage that individual to seek specialized mental health support from a licensed professional. It is important to respect self-determination of the individual who may or may not choose to seek such specialized support. These types of specialized mental health support resources can be offered but not required. Although the presence of positive feelings does not indicate the absence of psychological distress,[7] the presence of positive feelings does correlate with more resilience.[8,9] Therefore the prolonged absence of positive feelings would be an appropriate indicator that additional support could be helpful.

Moreover, all individuals who are participating in depopulation should be informed of the mental health resources that are available to them. Alerting animal professionals of these resources in regular intervals before, during, and after the depopulation would be appropriate.

Lastly there are mental health screeners that individuals can complete to help them monitor their psychological distress privately. For example these screeners from Mental Health America: **screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/**

Preparation

1) Locate employee behavioral health insurance benefits
2) Determine if company/farm has an Employee Assistance Program and what benefits are available
3) Provide mental health care information in advance
   a) Include free resources such as
      i) **screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/**
      ii) **suicidepreventionlifeline.org/** or call 988
      iii) **samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline**
4) Normalize consulting with mental health care as a part of sound self-care during depopulation

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