

Human wellbeing in animal care professionals

Since my first job almost 30 years ago, I have seen animals been born, cared for them daily, stayed the night if they were ill or when pregnant, been with them when they died. There are many stories of joy, of fun and success, of enrichment activities, behaviours trained, enjoying time together and play, of changes made. Good teamwork, seeing many animals flourish, and wonderful conservation, research, and education outcomes. Unfortunately, I have also worked in facilities where there was little or no regard for animal wellbeing – or human wellbeing. I have found myself in toxic work environments, have been bullied by bosses, and quit many paid jobs and volunteering positions. Did I have a role to play in that, could my communication have been better, could I..., well yes, every time these things happen there are a lot of sides to a story, however, many experiences were out of my control.

Since 2004 I enjoy fulltime work through AnimalConcepts, *and* I still miss being around and with animals every day. I enjoy living through the stories of all of you out there working for and with individual animals, the photos, videos, fun stories, and including conservation stories. So glad for all the virtual groups, and that my work takes me to work with people around the world. Sometimes meet a special animal too!

As in any other jobs that involve being in the service caring for others, we not only have wonderful things to share. I also hear the frustration and anger, of people leaving our field, and the stories of sorrow, of loss and pain, and feelings of letting the animals down. Of burnout, of empathic strain, and or depression. I hear and I feel these stories, as I have experienced some of these myself.

Today I spend a lot of time thinking, learning, and sharing about human wellbeing in our field. When I studied psychology 20 years ago, I came from the angle of how this could benefit the animals in my care, in learning and training, dealing with undesired behaviours, and promoting positive psychological wellbeing. I had no idea that I would come full circle and start a PhD in 2020 fully dedicated to human wellbeing, from both an individual and organisational perspective and approach.

Caring for wildlife (and other animals) in human care

Most animal care professionals in zoos and aquariums care for and about the animals as well as being invested in other goals such as education and conservation. Preparing food, cleaning, providing environmental enrichment, behavioural observations, animal training among other aspects, all fill a day easily. And many of us travel to help in species conservation, we bowl for rhinos, run in gorilla suits, and engage in other activities to raise awareness and support global efforts to help animals, species and wild places.

These include many positive aspects, joys, and opportunities such as interactions in enrichment, feeding, training, and predictable human-animal connections which can lead to bonds. These day-to-day activities, as well as more infrequent events such as travels, can give rise to positive feelings and thoughts. Feelings of purpose, and of making a difference for animals, as well as for other species and the environment through educational and conservation-based activities.

This work can also come with challenges and sorrows such as caring for ill, injured, and older animals, perceptions of poor welfare, and the passing of animals, in addition to stories of habitat destruction, loss of species, and a decline of planetary health. These can give rise to negative feelings and thoughts of loss, overwhelm, and hopelessness.

Individual differences, personalities, and resilience among others will all play a role in the individual experience of what it means to be an animal care professional and how one reacts to the joys and sorrows of the job as a whole, and how we deal with the positive and negative on a continuum we are faced with.

Much research has been done on the human-animal interaction, relationship, and bond from an animal perspective, but few insights are available from the carer staff perspective. Information on caring about other goals such as education and conservation is largely lacking too. There is much to say about human wellbeing, more than is possible or desirable in this shortish contribution. I will focus on a few of the dimensions of human wellbeing, ecological grief, and the We care and Self care approaches.

Dimensions of human wellbeing

In human wellbeing or wellness, there are different dimensions, including mental, financial, social, occupational, environmental, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and physical. I will briefly focus on social, financial, and emotional.

Social

One of the dimensions is social wellbeing which includes maintaining beneficial relationships, enjoying being with others, developing friendships and intimate relations, as well as caring about others, and letting others care for and about you. Today we know how important social support and networks are, in work and our personal life, which often blend into one, talking about work-life integration rather than balance.

Social wellbeing can also refer to our ability to interact successfully in our global community and to live up to the expectations and demands of our personal roles. It also includes showing respect for others and yourself.

Through various interactions and activities, including contributing to your community and to the world builds a sense of belonging. This is true for many of us working with animals and for other goals such as conservation, a feeling of connectedness to others who share our purpose and values.

Social wellness focuses on building and nurturing meaningful and supportive relationships with individuals, groups, and communities. This means learning good communication skills, developing intimacy with others, and creating a support network of friends and family members. It enables you to create boundaries that encourage communication, trust, and conflict management. Social wellness also includes showing respect for others, oneself, and other cultures.

While this is currently challenging, I am writing this in September 2021 while we are still in the COVID pandemic, there are many ways we can look at our social life and how we can safely and joyfully connect with our family, friends, co-workers, and extended community.

Financial

Lately I hear and see written reference to ensuring we pay people *living wages*. Like the word welfare or wellbeing, this does necessarily say anything specifically. While we often say that *we are not in it for the money*, when considering the financial aspects of wellbeing a clearer term I think would be *flourishing wages*. Not having to work 2 or more jobs to make ends meet, to be able to provide for yourself and loved ones, being able to pay your bills and have some money to save for

future goals, and spend on things that bring joy, are all part of flourishing wages. Living wages does not specify what sort of life, while *flourishing wages* indicates promoting optimal human wellbeing.

Apart from the need of *flourishing wages* organisation should invest and have in place e.g.:

- communication programs based on support, transparency, and care
- physical and psychological wellbeing and safety programs
- staff appreciations programs
- clear boundaries and guidelines of being ‘on and off’ the job for people to rest, unplug and restore
- opportunities for personal and professional continued development

Emotional

Emotional wellness fluctuates frequently with the other dimensions and is therefore dynamic in nature. The ability to feel and express your feeling such as happiness, sadness and anger, hope and joy are seen as being emotionally well. It means having the ability to achieving a sense of fulfilment in life, and to love and be loved. Optimism, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and the ability to share feelings, are all part of emotional wellbeing, and practicing self-compassion, setting healthy boundaries, practicing rituals for loss and grief, daily self care, all contribute to a better wellbeing.

Ecological grief

Ecological grief is defined in a variety of ways and one that resonated with me is “*The grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.*” (Cunsolo and Elllis, 2018). While the research on ecological grief is still very new, there are countless stories on hope and mourning of wild places and animals. I think this is an important aspect of our work, one that will ring true for many of you too. Many of us choose this profession because we care about species conservation, protecting wilderness, and attention to our thoughts and feelings around ecological grief is part of self and we care approaches.

We care

Organisations need to consider all dimensions of human wellbeing. What critical and meaningful questions, research, strategies, and processes need to be considered and reflected when thinking of mental, financial, social, occupational, environmental, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects of organizational health, which will be revolving around and expressed by the people within an organization.

It will be vital for an organisation to have common goals, such as flourishing animals and the people who care for them. To identify the different systems and actors in these systems, whose interactions and basis of relationships, make up the whole. Are the systems exploitative or symbiotic?

Organisations need to understand the rewards and risks of the work pertaining to the different professions, ranging from caregivers, curators, and veterinarians. The different jobs will have similarities, overlap, and difference that need to be considered.

Existing models such as the Complex Stress Model + Trauma-Exposed Workplaces (Fischer, 2016) can be adapted and be as a potential useful model for the zoo and aquarium field. This model integrates systemic workplace distressors such as job stress (including emotional labour), burn out and harassment with traumatic workplace stressors including primary/direct trauma (suffering animals, grief, and loss), secondary/indirect trauma (moral distress), and vicarious trauma.

Leadership plays a critical role in identifying, understanding, and supporting staff, including preventing and mitigating empathic strain, burnout, and chronic/accumulative stress. Professional risk factors can include lack of a professional support systems, inadequate orientation and training, inadequate resources – including salary, high workload, and understaffing.

Organisations need to have assessments, training, professional development, and interventions at both the organisational and individual levels, specifically from a proactive and protective strategic approach this will be crucial. To focus on staff wellbeing, including support at an individual level to effectively handle and respond to demands, to reduce stress and distress. To protect staff through policies, practices, and relationships that enhance the support people receive and reduce and or manage the demands.

Organisations need to understand what matters to their staff, and what is meaningful. Strategies that increase the ability to respond to negative work-related stressors, enhance resilience and promote anti-fragility need to be identified and supported. What brings joy and supports integrity, hope, and the shared purpose. Fostering relationships based on mutual respect and trust, team building, mentors or buddies, formal and informal celebrations and appreciations can all contribute to workplace wellbeing.

While some aspects can be distressing, especially when working with rescue animals, wildlife trade, and hearing stories of loss, sharing and contributing to the healing and resilience of animals, saving or species and wild places can impact us in positive ways, what we refer to as vicarious resilience. The impact of vicarious resilience can make us feel more energized, optimistic, and motivated, gain a greater appreciation and perspective and a profound sense of commitment to and finding meaning in the work. Ecological loss and mourning can be and are drivers of our work in species conservation and the protection of wild places, and attention to possible rituals and other strategies we can use to find solace and paths forward would be important and beneficial.

We need to have insights into how zoos and aquariums care for their staff; specifically what support systems and processes are provided. How diversity, equity, equality, and inclusion are embodied, and where physical and psychological wellbeing are considered in a similar fashion as we approach animal wellbeing today, holistically. With the aim to promote human flourishing and a culture of care.

Self care

How are you? Only 3 words, but such important words. To genuinely ask someone “how are you?”, can make such a difference in that person’s life, to give that attention and connection. These 3 words are also key to ask yourself, daily. No amount of selfcare will suffice if the environment you work in is unsupportive, unrespectful, unsafe – physically and psychologically, and or uncaring, so it is crucial to be and stay aware of whether a work environment is still in your best interest. While we might be sad about it, I know I have been in the past, sometimes we need to decide to leave, and that is OK. That is OK not to be OK I am sure you have seen and heard before. It is important to have that social support at work and in your personal life to express and engage with your feelings.

They say that feelings follow behaviour as often as behaviours feelings, and you have a choice how you show up, you have the ability to respond, responds-ability, to make choices and create habits that help you be and stay well. *“We are what we repeatedly do”* – Will Durant. You can create your favourite day being creating the habits you want, and to stop doing what does not serve you well. Self care is something you need to make time for, it means choosing you, and caring for you first.

Do no harm

The Green Cross Academy of Traumatology Self-care Guidelines clearly state: First, do no harm to yourself in the line of duty when helping/treating others. Self care is not selfish, it is fundamental and to do this work (next to caring for our loved ones and beyond) with integrity and joy for years to come we must care for ourselves first.

Not always fun

A lot can get in the way of caring for ourselves. Indeed, when you care for yourself, you say to yourself, ***I am important, I see myself and I matter.*** It is so important to be honest, we do often get in our own way when it comes to caring for ourselves, we let laziness in, and use others as reasons and excuses. It is our responsibility to make the time and put in the effort to have caring routines and or certain regular activities that support and restore you. We can indeed be lazy, and find ways to distract ourselves like constant internet, mindless Netflix or scrolling to zone out. Unfortunately, the latter all do not help in relaxing and restoring and therefore we often feel tired and unsatisfied after engaging in them.

Anything that contributes to you relaxing, enjoying, and also can be completing small tasks that need doing, and while it can be enjoyable and relaxing, it might not always involve fun things. But all are necessary. So perhaps self care is clearing that shelf and switching off Netflix early so you can get a good night's sleep. Today we think that sleep is the fundament that moving, healthy eating and other pillars of wellbeing are resting on. Often when we snack or eat without being hungry, when we listen to what we really need, it is sleep.

It is all data

Curiosity is not only good for keeping on learning and engaging but also for connecting and is a great stance to have towards yourself. For example, see yourself as an experimenter and all you collect is data. This allows for you to see e.g.:

- 1) what works (you got that workout done),
- 2) what needs work (switching off electronics earlier before going to sleep)
- 3) what you will do about it (set alarm to switch off and wind down +/- 1 hour before bedtime)

No shaming or blaming, more curiosity and accepting what is in that moment.

Self care does not have to be expensive

Self care does not have to be expensive, waking up and sitting or doing a walking meditation, doing a workout in your home or garden or in the park, bringing a book and lighting a candle to relax in your favourite chair, connecting with family and friends, or doing some of the household activities and attending to other responsibilities can all be done without spending lots of money, most almost free.

Your healthy boundaries and habits help you. E.g., I will sit to meditate focusing on my breath right after I wake up, then I will do 15 minutes of heartrate increasing exercises, then have a shower, breakfast, and brush my teeth, and pack a healthy lunch and snacks.

It is amazing what happens for the better when we state what we want, for example, a healthy energizing and grounding morning routine, that sets the tone for the day. This can all happen within 1 hour from waking up and you can do this. Every time you do something complement and celebrate

immediately. Sat or walked focusing on your breath – celebrate! Done with the workout – celebrate! Had a shower – celebrate, and so on. You will build credibility with yourself, enforcing that you can do this, and you deserve this. *"Healthy habits are learned in the same way as unhealthy ones - through practice.* - Wayne Dyer. Focus on building healthy habits and boundaries and skills to unwind, and play!

Humour and play

Humour which is always a good thing, fun, play and laughter can be great diffusers and sources of joy, and for me it is always a red flag - when I take everything too serious and lose my sense of humour, I know I must even more pay attention to my wellbeing. Have some fun activities lined up, your hilarious friend on speed dial, and practice some silly walks, whatever makes you laugh and enjoy, do not forget to play!

Finding purpose and joy in your work

Wanting to affect change, acknowledging the challenges, even embracing the uncertainty, and wanting to be different from mainstream to act and work towards change for animals, species and conservation goals – embodying ‘be the change you want to see in the world’ can all contribute to your wellbeing. Especially when things are difficult and when facing challenges, it is important to be able to reach and use that drive, your passion and purpose, to find strength to continue. Seeing the animals do well or get well, possible releases or reintroductions, habitat protection, and other positive impacts and changes made, hearing stories of healing and successes, can all have a positive impact on you, remember vicarious resilience. Maybe you have lost your why due to the challenges, sad losses, and uncertainty encountered. Whatever it might be, spend some time thinking and feeling on the question of your why, and how derive purpose and joy from your profession. Find your way back or onwards.

Dealing with hardships

Especially when facing the challenges and the illness or death of an animal it is even more important to have social support. Rituals to celebrate an animal’s life, having access to local psychological help, as well as clear work/non work life integration are key to supporting human wellbeing and our ability to continue our work with integrity, purpose, and joy. Spending time to consider how to manage time, manage the seemingly infinite stream of tasks, problems and other aspects that make the job hard, need to be addressed at an organisational level as well as setting clear personal boundaries and strategies.

The 1 thing I should do for myself today

Self care can be a lot of different things, is highly personal and at the same time there are universal truths, like we need to eat well nourishing our body, moving regularly and sleep enough. You might like to draw or paint, while I love to read, and for others self care can mean something else entirely. Identify what are those things you want to do for yourself – note want to do ☺ Moving away from should and have to I want to do this; I get to do this. What is that 1 thing you get to do for yourself today. You get to go to bed early, you get to eat that healthy snack, you get to have fun with friends. What is it for you? Schedule your self care, it is the most important appointment you have every day, with yourself because you matter.

Eating and drinking is of course another fundamental, particularly focussing on healthy nutritional food. Especially when we get busy and have a lack of time but run the risk to skip meals, eat on the

fly and grab less nutritious options. So, 1 of the things to do 1-2 a week is to prepare some meals and have healthy snacks easily available.

Being mindful, expressing gratitude, using breathing exercises, and pray can also help you feel grounded, happy, more positive, and feeling restored. Self care can be lovely and cosy, but it can also be doing what is important now, including paying bills, getting that shelf cleared, do the laundry, and tidy the house, whatever helps you feel calm and importantly, switching off to restore and rest so you can continue your work without burning up and out. The 'simple' things like having a shower, brushing your teeth, mindfully enjoying your breakfast, going for a stroll, are all key to caring for yourself and slowing down in this demanding job.

Our work and experiences can be quite stressful and overwhelming, take time and hold space to listen to yourself. *When you honestly ask, 'what do I need' and you quietly listen, you know.*

Ask yourself how you feel and what you need and listen to the first things that pop out. Quiet down to listen to yourself, making sure that we hold to space to listen. *You know what you need and need to do, and we need to encourage ourselves to listen.*

For example, when you are you tired, try to go to bed earlier, take a power nap, install a digital sunset (all electronics off at least 1 hour before going to bed), meditate for 10-15 minutes in the morning (helps falling asleep at night), do some meditation or relaxing yoga before going to bed, and you probably already have or know of others that support you.

You are not alone

You are not alone; we are not alone. Starting with ourselves we can become the change we want to see and ways we care about ourselves. We are connected and together and self care (individuals) and we care (organisations) have a responsibility to care about our physical and psychological wellbeing.

One Care

Within AnimalConcepts we commit to the 'One Care' approach, which is based on human and animal flourishing. Compassionate self-care and we-care approaches combined will support a commitment and desire of working in service of animals and the environment. When we take care to give care, peoples and animals can flourish.

I believe there are always opportunities, reasons to have hope, and look towards a brighter future. When it comes to human wellbeing in zoos and aquariums, as well as sanctuaries and wildlife centres, both from an individual and organisational perspective, we have a lot of opportunities to grow and change. Change begins with me, with you, as well as organisations acknowledging their responsibilities for the people they have on staff. Considering human wellbeing from a holistic perspective, including physical and psychological wellbeing. While I focussed more on the animal care professional, of course all employed deserve this attention and consideration, from educators, researchers, ground personnel and others. Self care to We Care, "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson ~

Gratitude and celebrations

As a former animal caregiver, but also a zoological director, I know that we often want to do more than are able (e.g., due to lack of time, budget, common goals, higher aspirations), often forgetting or brushing over the many things we already do. I know most people in our professions do more

than what is in their job description, spend their lunches to observe, use their own money on the animals or continuous personal development. I see you, as I did/do this too. Know and acknowledge, and bring gratitude to all you do, celebrate what you do daily, and trace to hold them in memory, accessing them when you want to. Next week an on-demand webinar will be made available through ICZ in which I share some exercises you could do that could support your wellbeing.

This was a whirlwind of only a few details when thinking of human wellbeing in zoos and aquariums. Let's continue the conversation, it is already happening in many places, at many levels. I SEE YOU. Let's continue to learn, share, and due diligence, it is important for peoples, for animals, and this beautiful planet we share.

So sing, play, hop & skip, laugh lots, find and hold space for quietness, joy and love in mind, heart, and spirit, whatever sounds true for you. Acknowledge your contributions, and know you are enough. Remember that self care is not always fun, and important, nonetheless. You can do hard things and often especially when we do not 'feel' like it, it is what we need most. When things are challenging, which they are in our work, it is even more important that we stay grounded and committed to healthy boundaries and habits.

'What does '*feeling like it*' have to do with it? You decided you were going to do it, it was important enough for you, do it daily.' - Michael Beckwith

Keep going, small steps every day! 'Don't break the streak.' - Jerry Seinfeld

Feel welcome in the safe, brave, and monitored FB group Human Wellbeing in Animal Care Professions for more content, sharing, learning, and embodying care for ourselves. This group is also <https://www.facebook.com/groups/795957177672327>

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Take care to give care,
Sabrina