

How can I make you feel better today?

I watched an episode of Royal Pains, an easy going and fun series about a concierge doctor's practice called HankMed in the Hamptons. When answering the phone, they say: "*How can we make you feel better today?*".

Of course, I am not suggesting that all the animals we take care of are sick or not having good welfare. I do like this client-centred approach where one is sensitive to another's needs, such as comfort, the feeling of being important and cared for. The animals we care for are all important individuals and I like the idea of asking "how can I make you feel important today?". To stand still frequently in our regular and busy working day and pause, to connect to the animal and tune in more deeply. What is it that I can do for you to make it better? How can I make your environment safe (physically and psychologically), complex, stimulating, with choice and control? How do I support social opportunities, learning new skills, relaxed sleeping and resting areas, things to do and choose when I am not there? What can I do to make you feel good, to make you feel important and cared for?

In the past when I was still working full-time in a zoo, I often did not take the time to focus on the details, because I was so swamped with work and full filling the needs of our visiting public, safety etc.. For example, I did not always notice that the bedding material was less in quantity or not of good quality and the nest building of our small rodents was OK, but not ideal. With the marine mammals like dolphins, seals, sea lions and walruses we used some enrichment devices, but most objects would only float and were hard to take to the bottom, or to interact with in the water column. And they did not have any or very few foraging opportunities beside the training sessions. I was not always aware of my body language and tone of voice or have the time to observe enrichment or their behaviour. And the hours I was not at work were definitely a black hole as I rarely got the opportunity to observe animals at night and most places did not have night cameras. I did not stop enough from all the running to think about what I could do in the habitat or night areas to improve the lives of animal, a little bit every day and which compounds over time. We often overestimate what we can get done in a day, but underestimate how much can get done if we consistently do small steps everyday towards certain goals, such as refurbishing indoor areas. By paying more attention details: 1) to quality of life throughout their whole life, for example, the quality of interaction with you, the environment or other, as well as 2) quantity – a wide variety of activities and opportunities, of the different aspects of an animal's life, we can continue to make positive changes for the animals we care for 24/7 across lifespan.

This is an adaptation from a blog written in 2012, and another sentence I really like and stuck with me after a conference in Romania in 2016 is, "*Have you enriched a life today?*" A short and wonderful question, which can be for animals, a team member, a visitor, and of course yourself. And how do you know you have enriched a life? Observable behaviour, how it felt for you, and feedback from others, can all be clues that what you think is enriching indeed also feels or is perceived that way. Data-informed and doing research is another way to reflect our commitment to optimal animal wellbeing.

Animal care is a dynamic profession and field, and to stay abreast of all the changes, new information and research, we should be continually learning about the different species, and individuals we care for. For example, with new research findings we can consider whether relevant, and if so, how can we use this knowledge to the best of our abilities, and apply it to improving practical daily care?

We should not do what we do just because we are busy, or just because we have always done it this way which is a common sentiment and hurdle in the progress of animal care, and an obstacle to providing the animals with the best welfare standards and according to best practice. Perhaps the way we have always done it is the best way, but we have to stop to ask the question. We should challenge the status quo and push the envelope, challenge ourselves and others in order for our programs to reflect best practice and excellent in care.

If every time I come to work, I ask, *how can I make you feel important today? & how can I enrich a life today?*, I am more mindful of what I do and why in my aim of giving the best care for an individual animal and or the group. Or for anyone else around me, and myself, and I can keep little notes in a notebook or on my phone to remember what went well, what efforts I made. Asking myself at the end of the day *'Have you enriched a life today?'*, is a nice way to stand still and acknowledge the day, that I have tried my best, and celebrate. Especially on hard days it can be helpful and kind to review the positive feedback, the happy behaviours or interactions. You can control only yourself by being the change in the world we would like to see we can inspire others to also do this, and together we can be a force for good.

"Do something wonderful, people may imitate it"~ Albert Schweitzer ~

As you know, professional animal care goes way beyond cleaning and feeding. Enrichment, training, complex environments, adequate nutrition, appropriate social groups for social animals, choice and control over the environment, excellent human - animal relationships, they all are building blocks in professional animal care programs that hold animal welfare as the priority and at the highest standards. It also reflects what we hope for and work so diligently towards, good and positive animal wellbeing, for each individual to live their best 1 life, and have as much agency over one's life as possible.

So next time you go to work at the zoo, shelter, or even with your pets and other animals at home (or anyone really) make sure to ask "How can I make you feel better today?" and circle back at the end of the day to celebrate which lives you enriched that day.

This contribution is in memory of the late Valerie Hare - 3rd from the left with her big smile, and Graham Law in the light blue shirt, two individuals who for sure enriched my life, and made it much better because they were in it. You are both missed dearly and your ideas and inspirations to make changes for animals lives on in so many ways.

Interested to reach more, sign up for our newsletter [HERE](#)