

F A C T S H E E T

Adopting an Abused Animal: What You Should Know

When shelters rescue animals from cruelty cases, they often receive an outpouring of offers from people wanting to adopt these animals. This fact sheet, adapted from the New York State Humane Association, is designed to educate the public about the special needs of abused animals and to help potential adopters make informed—not impulsive—decisions about adopting them.

Crueity to animals takes many forms and can be found in virtually every community. When the laws to protect animals are effectively enforced, authorities often succeed in removing the victims of abuse from the people who had abused them. Frequently, local animal shelters offer such animals for adoption to responsible homes. These shelters usually receive an outpouring of offers from animal lovers to adopt these animals. Such offers are generous and genuine, but are sometimes made for the wrong reasons and without real knowledge of the problems involved.

THE WRONG REASON

Potential adopters must ask themselves, “Do I really want a pet? Or am I reacting with a sympathetic humanitarian response to the atrocity of animal abuse?” These are basic questions that have to be answered by anyone thinking about adopting an animal from this situation. While feeling compassion for these animals is a normal human emotion, it should not be the sole reason for wanting to adopt one of these animals. Adopting *any* animal is an enormous responsibility and entails a change in lifestyle. To enter into such an undertaking with an animal who is sure to have health, behavior, and emotional problems is something that must be given serious consideration.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Rescued animals typically have numerous medical problems and will require long-term, special medical attention.

BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Many of these animals are not housetrained. An un-housetrained dog requires an enormous investment of time and patience to “unlearn” bad habits and learn new ones. Depending on how long the animals were in the abusive situation and at what age they were placed there, their behavior problems may not be reversible.

Many abused animals are unsocialized and distrustful of people. Great care must be taken to restrain and contain them. Should they escape, it will usually be extremely difficult to retrieve them. Many will react in fear and will try at all costs to avoid being handled by anyone in pursuit of them.

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TEMPERAMENT PROBLEMS

Many of these animals require a great deal of patience before they accept their new owners as friends. It is very disheartening to adopt an abused dog, expecting some gratitude, only to find that the dog doesn't trust you—he hides, will not eat in front of you, runs away when you call, and prefers to be left alone.

Extraordinary efforts are required to train and socialize them. It is a lifetime commitment. Some of this unsociable, fearful, depressed behavior can be overcome with time, but often these animals remain on the periphery of family life.

EATING DISORDERS

Abused dogs have often been deprived of food and water for long periods of time. As a result, many of these animals have eating disorders. Often they will gulp their food and then vomit, or refuse to eat in front of anyone. Many times they have been forced to eat rodents or each other to survive, so they must be carefully watched around other pets and children.

SUMMARY

This information is not meant to discourage all potential adopters from offering their hearts and homes to an abused animal. It is provided so that people are aware of the potential problems that may occur. Although many of these animals can become good companions, others remain intractable and anti-social in spite of heroic efforts. The commitment that must be made in terms of time, patience, training, and health care needs often goes beyond what the average pet owner can manage.

After reviewing the facts and asking themselves hard questions, some people recognize that they really do not want a pet; they simply want to do something to help the animals. There are many ways to help:

- Give a gift of the heart by making a donation to the shelter that will house the animal while the court case is being adjudicated—or give a contribution to your own shelter to help the animals at that facility.
- Obtain a list of legislative bills that deal with animal welfare issues and write letters to legislators and to the media in support of those bills.
- Keep an eye out for animal abuse. Whenever you see it, report it to local animal shelters and police promptly; follow up on your reports to see if action has been taken.
- Do not condemn animal shelters for euthanizing animals for whom responsible homes cannot be found. They are forced to take this extreme action to prevent the kinds of terrible suffering that result when animals are confined for long periods in unacceptable conditions or fall into the hands of individuals who flagrantly neglect and abuse them.
- Encourage your family, friends, and work associates to be responsible pet owners and to spay and neuter their companion animals.