

A Flood of Emotion

Three years after Katrina, Dr. Chris Duke of the Bienville Medical Center in Ocean Springs, Miss., discusses how stress has affected Gulf Coast residents—and their pets



PAUL TURNER/THE HSUS

Katrina's floodwaters traumatized many animals and people. Some Mississippi communities are still dealing with the emotional aftershocks.

When the Gulf floodwaters finally abated in 2005, they left behind more than physical devastation. The years since Katrina have been a constant struggle for those trying to put their homes, neighborhoods, and lives back together, and the emotional and psychological hurdles have been substantial.

As a veterinarian on the Mississippi coast, Dr. Chris Duke was fortunate: His practice was 35 feet above sea level, and incurred minimal hurricane damage. The Bienville Medical Center was able to stay open for business in the days, months, and years following the storm, taking on clients from other practices that were forced to shut down for good.

Since Katrina, Duke has encountered an array of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases in pets and their owners, caused by what he calls “displacement under forced circumstances.” He estimates that 50 percent of the pet owners affected by Katrina have companion animals who endured this stress, and the manifestations of it have included new phobias, severe personality or temperament changes, chronic chewing or paw licking, and depression.

Duke also attributes some of the behavioral changes to a sudden shift or breakdown in physical boundaries: When fences were wiped out by the storm, the confrontation of free-roaming dogs resulted in aggression and fighting during Katrina's chaotic aftermath.

In the following excerpted interview with *Animal Sheltering* writer Alexandra Kleinkopf, Duke discusses what pet owners were anticipating before the storm, and the emotional stress they and their surviving animals have endured in its wake.

***Animal Sheltering:* What correlation did you find between pet and pet owner stress post-Katrina?**

Dr. Chris Duke: The trauma emotionally was there. You know, just like people went through a lot of depression and mourning because of losing their stuff, losing their possessions—sometimes even losing family members' lives—there was that type of loss, relocation loss. Flooding itself, you know—I think that people in the rest of the U.S. don't appreciate how this wasn't a wind hurricane



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The trauma of lost homes and weeks of housing in temporary emergency shelters affected many pets displaced after Katrina.

as much as it was a water hurricane. And I think those that saw the news and saw the flooding in New Orleans where the levees broke have one image of it. But as I always tell people, here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, it was like a tidal surge. ... Even 10, 12, 15 miles inland you were having a lot of surges where houses were flooding, because if they were anywhere near a creek bed or a drainage ditch or a river, those bodies of water filled to flood stages quite quickly too. ... This was horrifying for these pets to watch too, because it's a freak of nature they've never experienced before. And so I think that not only the freak of "Hey, there's water here that's not usually here"—and they're having nightmares and probably mental repercussions of it; that's certainly one aspect of it—but I think that the relocation and displacement of people and their pets has obviously affected them. Because like us, if you're used to your same domicile and you have to move somewhere else, yeah, that can be a life-changing thing. Especially if it separates you from the key people you've been used to being with. ...

I think you have to look at the whole picture and say we're talking about human psychology and animal psychology, and they're *closely*, closely entwined. I think that basically animals respond to the humans' psychological status; and once again, if people are back in their routines and happy and content with how life is going, the animals respond in kind. They're along for the ride with the people who own them, and they're reading the same emotions in many cases.

Do you have a method for coping with disaster in future situations?

A lot of people didn't see the flood coming. I have very, very good clients—people you would never accuse of having any ill thoughts about an animal; they take care of their pets the best way possible—that thought, "Oh boy, Category 4, Category 5 hurricane—we better get out of here. We'll be back day after tomorrow. You know, we're going through the motions of a hurricane evacuation. Maybe it'll be like Hurricane Ivan the year before and kind of veer off at the last minute, and

we can come right back home. Well, let's leave the cats in the house or in the garage and put out some extra food and stuff." You know what happened? They lost their pets, and they had tremendous guilt trips ... these are good people that didn't maliciously do anything to these pets—but they didn't see the flood coming. The bottom line I preach when it comes to evacuation down here ... *take them with you*. Find a pet-friendly hotel up the road inland, find a friend or relative that says, "Sure, you can evacuate to here and bring your pet too." Have this laid out in

plan *before* the disaster strikes, so that when the storm gets in the Gulf and the warnings go out you can say, "OK, I've got that provision taken care of and my pets are provided for, too."

Is there any way emergency response teams can help lessen psychological side effects the next time disaster strikes?

We had relief groups come down here and offer their assistance, but—what I'm gonna say may sound cockeyed or backward to those who aren't in business—but on a personal level, we didn't honestly get much help from relief, nor did we *want* much help from relief. And that's a head-scratcher when I say that to people in our field. ... We were more about getting people back to work and getting animals fixed [up] than we were worrying about the relievers finding, quote unquote, something to do with us. ... Getting people back to work and giving the people who really love animals the chance to help animals, it's not only satisfying their economic need, but it's

satisfying the need of their soul to help pets. ... We've had government agencies look into this locally, and say, "Ooh, next time there's an evacuation, let's run public buses and public transportation and get people evacuated to shelters, get pets evacuated to shelters adjacent to those shelters." And the counties and cities have worked on that, but you know what? They're minimal facilities. If you were to stay in, let's say, a high school gymnasium or a church sanctuary for a week, wouldn't you feel kind of trapped and imprisoned? And wouldn't that ... building that they've provided for the pets out there feel like a prison to your pet sooner or later? I mean, you have to think that stuff through. It's no place—it's not a home, it's not a domicile. It's a temporary relocation. And by the way, this is important to note, these places have maximum capacities too. And if you hit that maximum capacity, then what? If it's a huge enough disaster, you better have more room than that.

Do you find that animals and humans are recovering emotionally, staying the same, or gradually getting worse as the recovery goes on?

I think it's gradually getting better, and part of it is time heals a lot of wounds for both humans and pets.

What can pet owners do to lessen their pets' stress, as well as their own? Is there joint therapy they can take?

You know, I haven't had a pet therapist—we don't have any in practice around here. I know they do in big cities—but certainly, I'm sure there have been some of those that have worked with some of these patients affected. But to me, the best No. 1 therapy I can give to people is [the advice]: Keep them together with you when you evacuate; keep them close at hand so that you share companionship during a disaster—and for God's sake, take 'em with ya.

What's the role of pet therapy in relieving post-traumatic stress?



Some of the animals left behind when their owners evacuated were rescued by Good Samaritans; John McPhail crawled through the mud-swamped window of an abandoned house to rescue this young pit bull after the storm.

I don't have anything against it. I have a couple colleagues of mine that are into holistic therapies and those kinds of things. I personally don't have a lot of experience in it, and when I have clients that are really, really serious about seeking that alternative—alternative medicine, if you will—I usually send them to one of my colleagues that does it. ... We have what we call us "mainstream" practitioners and those that are in alternative medicine; and I'm a mainstreamer. You know, I tend to do what we learned about in the literature and hear about at conferences. And, like I said, there are those that do very well with alternative medicine.

When is the use of antidepressants warranted for pets?

I think when things like chronic wound licking, anorexia, and destructive behaviors like that are involved, you do have to look at the Prozac and those types of products we're using for dogs. Cats, too. You know, we have Buspar and amitriptyline and some of these psychological drugs we use for their behaviors as well. So yeah, I think that when they get into a self-destructive or clinical behavior issue where it's warranted, you have to put them on—I always do a month-at-a-time trial just to see how they do. Just like in human psychology ... Occasionally it can be hit-and-miss, but when you hit, you feel a lot better. AS