

Worksheet 3: Description of the animal metaphors

The emotional animal metaphors

The ostrich

The ostrich finds it hard to cope with the volcanic situation that often arises when trying to tackle the difficult problem of living with an eating disorder. Emotions and the complexities of human behaviour are too chaotic and confusing. The ostrich prefers to put her/his head down into the sand, avoiding emotions at all costs. This is something s/he knows s/he can confidently do, avoiding what seems too hard. The downside is that the sufferer may misinterpret this approach, seeing the carer as uncaring and so may end up feeling unloved. Self-esteem is sapped away. Additionally, the concealment of emotions sets an unhelpful example for the sufferer to follow. Setting an example of emotional honesty and spreading the concept that having controlled emotions is normal and acceptable human behaviour, will aid the sufferer in coming to terms with their own difficulties with emotional expression. Living with others who can and are able to convey their feelings with words will aid the sufferer in changing their only way of articulating their own emotions, which currently is through food.

The jellyfish

Some carers may be unable to regulate their own intense emotional responses to the ED. Their distress and anger is transparent to all, this gives the message that this carer needs looking after and at the very least needs to be treated with kid gloves. In this sea of emotion, it is hard to steer a clear path. Also, like a jellyfish, overt anger and anxiety can exert a poisonous sting with the same uncontrolled emotions being mirrored by the sufferer. Unfortunately, this serves to strengthen the eating disorder hold. The downside is that these 'sad and mad' emotions escalate causing tears, tempers, sleepless nights and exhaustion in all parties.

The behavioural animal metaphors

The kangaroo

This type of carer does everything to protect by taking over all aspects of the sufferer's life. They treat the sufferer with kid gloves, letting them jump into the kangaroo pouch in an effort to avoid any upset or stress. The downside of this type of caring is that Edi fails to learn how to approach and master life's challenges. S/he only feels safe living in this limbo land suspended in a childlike cocoon unable to visualise taking on the world in all its colour or the mantle of adulthood. The kangaroo carer will accommodate to all demands whether they are rational or driven by the eating disorder.

The rhino

Fuelled by stress, exhaustion and frustration, or simply one's own temperament, the rhino attempts to persuade and convince by argument and confrontation. The

downside is that even when Edi does obey, confidence to continue to do so without assistance is not developed. In fact, the more likely response to a rhino 'in a china shop' is to argue back with an even stronger eating disorder voice. An outcome of this is that, for example, the more the ED minx retaliates, the more the eating disorder identity is consolidated, embedded and validated.

The terrier

The terrier persistently cajoles, nags and tries to wear out the anorexic minx or the bulimic boa constrictor. The downside of this terrier-type behaviour is that either the sufferer tunes out to what they perceive as irritating white noise, or gives the opportunity for covert negative counteracting behaviours. Caring motives are misunderstood and everyone's morale is sapped. Edi loses the inner resource to face the rich tapestry of life without an eating disorder identity.

After considering the animal metaphors that depict the typical emotional responses and behaviours, we can now consider the dolphin and St Bernard, who present a more emotionally regulated caring approach. We can also consider the idea of social support with the collaborative approach that the metaphor of the herd of elephants may depict (see Module 6).

The dolphin carer offers just enough caring and control. Imagine a pod of dolphins swimming along and one of the baby dolphins starts to swim out into the danger zone. One of the dolphins, not necessarily the Mum or Dad, will swim alongside them and gently nudge them back into the safety zone. This is done with a hands-off approach with the bigger picture and social support in mind. At times the adult dolphin might swim ahead, leading the way, at other times swim alongside with encouragement, watch while other family members help, and even quietly swim behind, showing trust and confidence.

The St Bernard carer offers just enough compassion and consistency. In the face of any avalanche or trauma, the St Bernard carer responds consistently and is unfailing, reliable and dependable. The St Bernard has a good antennae attuned to the welfare and safety of those who are lost... calm, warm and nurturing. The St Bernard instils hope in Edi that they can change, that there is a future full of possibility beyond the eating disorder. The St Bernard carer has the patience of a saint and offers unconditional love whatever happens. S/he does not yap too loudly and cause an avalanche

The herd of elephants

Collaboration is key to the skills we are teaching and so we have taken up the elephant metaphor given to us recently by a carer. Collaborative

care is like being a herd of elephants linking trunks and tails, to jointly care for the young ones. In this metaphor the carer works with a team of wise others to make decisions and provide care. This illustrates the importance of including friends and family and of course getting information from books and workshops. This also underlines the importance of working with a wider support network including the GP, A&E and specialist care teams. This is expanded further in Module 6: Working as a herd of elephants – collaboration between all carers. Consider some of your current caring responses. Do they fit in with any of these animal metaphors? Are they helpful? If so carry on doing them. If not consider how you could respond in a different way – perhaps more like a dolphin and St Bernard.