



Gay Bradshaw says she creates sanctuary for her dog Pir by slowing down to spend quality time with him.

## HEALING THEIR MINDS

A LOOK AT HOW ANIMALS EXPERIENCE LOSS AND TRAUMA

**IT WAS 1996**, and Gay Bradshaw was studying lions in South Africa. Apartheid had ended two years earlier, and the country was rebuilding ecotourism by restocking its parks and preserves with wild animals, including lions. Bradshaw's land ecology expertise would help advocates understand how the change affected the animals.

She immediately saw that lions faced challenges as a direct result of relocation, disease and other stresses.

She already had a master's degree in geophysics and a doctorate in forest ecology, but Bradshaw's experiences led her to obtain a second doctoral degree, this time in psychology.

While researching her dissertation, she came across stories of captive elephants attacking their handlers and wild elephants displaying abnormal behaviors, such as killing rhinos. And there were stories of violence against elephants: wildlife culls and political wars in which thousands of elephants were killed. The elephants who killed the rhinos, it turned out, were cull survivors who had witnessed their families being killed. Relocated to unfamiliar territory, they were deprived of the socialization from adult elephants that they normally would have received in their teen years.

For Bradshaw, the connection was clear: The orphaned elephants were suffering

from post-traumatic stress disorder.

She began researching trauma and recovery in other species—and introduced the new field of trans-species psychology, which studies animals' psychological well-being and culture.

In 2008, she founded The Kerulos Center in Jacksonville, Oregon, to raise awareness of the effects of trauma in animals and the potential for healing. In 2009, she wrote *Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us About Humanity*, a psychological portrait of elephants in captivity and the wild. She's currently working on a book exploring carnivore psychology.

In this edited interview with staff writer Ruthanne Johnson, Bradshaw talks about human-inflicted trauma in elephants and other animals and how the healing begins.

### Why did you study trauma in elephants?

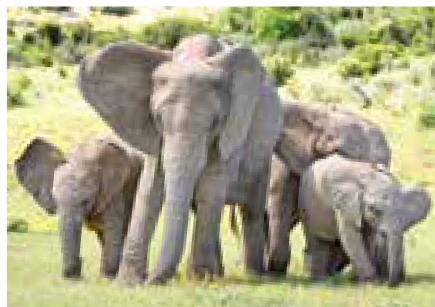
When I was growing up, my father said, "With anything you do in this world, be healthy, be happy and make a contribution." His words have influenced most everything I've done. When I was in South Africa, I heard about the rhino-killing elephants, but the bell did not go off until I began studying psychology. The elephants' plight compelled me to help them.

### Why do you think PTSD in animals had not been studied?

There's resistance both inside and outside science. Scientists have known that animals suffer psychologically for centuries. Most laboratory research uses nonhuman species as surrogates to study human brains, minds and psychological suffering. My work overturns the rationale upon which modern society is built—the justifiability of animal exploitation.

### Can you explain some of the trauma elephants have experienced?

Elephants are under siege. Their ancient migratory paths have been breached by roads and development. All they have left are tiny parks and reserves. Their great society has been dashed into pieces by hunting, poaching and culls. Elephants have witnessed their families harmed and killed. Many orphaned young are taken from their families



to zoos and circuses and tortured. Captive-bred elephants are taken from their mothers very young. They often live alone and are moved around. Symptoms of captive elephants are consistent with a diagnosis of complex PTSD, which is common among political prisoners and those in human prison camps.

**You've had a pet parrot for 45 years. What has he taught you?**

I've learned two things from him: how loss stays with you forever and the vastness

of bird souls. Panama is very happy and enjoys a rich psychological and physical life. However, he, like all captive parrots, carries the shadow of loss. He was taken violently from his family, flock and forest. He witnessed the horror of capture and the deaths of many other parrots. They went without food and water for days. But even though our family constellation of dogs, cats, rabbits, humans and turkeys now makes up his flock, I believe he is still incomplete. Capture, captive breeding and flightless and lonely captivity irreversibly etch the minds of birds. The depth of their pain is reflected in their symptoms that are so intense some birds self-mutilate to the point of suicide. Panama's innate grace and love are a constant inspiration for me.

**How does healing begin?**

One never heals from trauma because trauma changes you. But we can create space that reinstates a sense of security, love and

care. There are some great organizations that provide healing for elephants, such as Boon Lott's Elephant Sanctuary in Thailand and the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya. These sanctuaries are helping elephants rebuild their culture and modeling how humans can live peacefully with other animals. Fauna Foundation does a beautiful job with former research chimpanzees, as does Foster Parrots with birds.

**What can people do for their animals at home?**

It's about listening to your animal family members. If your dog barks, don't just say, "Be quiet." Listen to what he is barking about. Spend time exploring what's meaningful to him. Being sanctuary—creating space in your home supportive of trauma recovery—is about maintaining lifetime place and relationships. We are shaped by whom we meet and know, and the same goes for other animals.

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