



Pet project

WITH THEIR INNATE ABILITY TO COMFORT AND SOOTHE, ANIMALS CAN OFFER EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN A THERAPEUTIC ENVIRONMENT, SAYS REBECCA FRANK



PHOTOGRAPHY: TRACK CLINIC, MBI/ALAMY

If you've ever owned a dog or cat, you'll have experienced how they seem able to read your emotions and change their behaviour accordingly. I've grieved the loss of my dad with my old dog Alfie intently spooning me on the sofa, spent days lying ill in bed and recovering from surgery as a teenager with one of our family cats permanently by my feet. Even our rabbit stood in as a furry non-judgmental friend to our kids, becoming less skittish and happy to be stroked and provide comfort when emotions were running high.

But it's not just pets in the home that are boosting the wellbeing of their owners. Around the country there are dogs, cats, horses, hens, rabbits and guinea pigs providing a therapeutic service in schools, prisons, universities, cancer treatment centres, rehabilitation centres and care homes. Basically, think of an environment or situation where people might need emotional support and if animals are allowed in, they can usually be of assistance.

DOGTORS ON CALL

Volunteers for the charity Pets As Therapy (petsastherapy.org) take their pet dog or cat to visit people in a variety of settings where the owners witness first-hand the therapeutic benefits their pets can offer. In care homes, the animals offer companionship to people who may be lonely or depressed or perhaps suffering from dementia. Julia, a PAT volunteer, takes her dog Chilli to visit a care home every week where the residents, several of whom have dementia, adore her. "The difference Chilli makes to those with dementia is quite astonishing," she says. "She has a calming effect on people who otherwise might be agitated and distressed. For others, she's a reminder of past pets and brings back warm memories that we can talk about."

Pets are also taken into schools where children who have difficulty reading are often encouraged to read to a dog. "Teachers report seeing a great improvement in literacy skills as a result," says Lorna Cowan of PAT. The presence of animals can help children with behavioural issues and those who struggle to concentrate, and can improve symptoms of anxiety. A National Institute of Health study showed that having a dog in a classroom promotes a positive mood among pupils and notably reduces stress

"Horses can help people unpick and express difficult emotions"

levels. Another study showed children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) showed more interactive social behaviour and less anxiety when playing with guinea pigs.

FURRY THERAPISTS

Animals can also play a key role in therapy sessions, helping people to find therapy less intimidating and stressful. Known as Animal-Assisted Therapy, it involves a client interacting with an animal in the presence of a trained therapist. The animal, usually a dog or horse, encourages a person to relax and open up to the therapist, who can also gain insight into how they respond in different situations by how they interact with the animal. Animal-Assisted Therapy has been shown to be beneficial to people suffering from anxiety and depression and can help with trauma recovery. I visit Nina Leijerstam, an equine-assisted coach and behaviourist at her practice in Somerset (trackclinic.co.uk) to discover how horses can help people unpick and express difficult emotions. "When horses are free to respond instinctively, free from control techniques and training by humans, they respond to how we make them feel," she explains. Nina leads me to the field where her four horses and alpaca have a calm, spacious environment to graze and roam. I spend an hour sitting and walking among the animals and am fascinated to see how each responds to me so differently. Nina occasionally asks questions about what I might be noticing or feeling, and I find myself coming up with metaphors for the horses; "these three are like my teenage children, I want to keep an eye on them as they go wandering off," I say.

It's not difficult to understand how animals might make many people feel more relaxed but there's clearly more to it than that. "Ninety per cent of any communication is unspoken and equine-assisted coaching allows an exploration into our non-verbal impact and influence on others," explains Nina. "If someone is stuck in therapy it can help you quickly get to the nitty »



"The relationship between a human and an animal can feel easier"

gritty. But it's not always about solving a problem, it can be 'what can I learn about myself, what do I need to see?' Lorna agrees. "It's amazing what an animal can encourage people to do," she says.

The relationship shared between a human and animal can sometimes feel easier and less stressful than human relationships. Animal-assisted therapists refer to how an animal has no judgment and how people can feel freer to be themselves in their presence. Nina explains how the horses can behave in a way that might remind the person of a particular experience or person in their life. "They might be playful and boisterous to unlock a sense of joy or placid and sleepy to allow a person to feel rested and at peace." I arrive to the session quite agitated but feel extremely calm while sitting between two of the horses as they munch on hay. Meanwhile a very large horse watches me intensely from the stable. I find the grazing sound strangely meditative, and the big horse stirs thoughts of my dad who passed away a few years ago. 'Is he watching over me?' I wonder.

HOME HELP

While therapy dogs are generally selected for their easy-going nature but don't necessarily have any specialist training, service dogs are

Could your pet help others?

Volunteering with your pet can be an enjoyable and rewarding thing to do. All Pets As Therapy (PAT) animals are assessed first, but here are a few things to bear in mind if you're considering it.

- Pets need to be friendly and calm, healthy and groomed.
- Dogs and cats must be able to walk on a relaxed lead without excessive pulling.
- Pets must accept being stroked and patted and enjoy being fussed over.
- Barking, hissing and licking aren't accepted.
- Clients love to give pets a treat, so it's important that they don't snatch it, jump up or paw as there's a risk of injury, particularly with elderly people.
- Dogs must be at least nine months old and you must have known them for at least six months.
- They must be fully vaccinated and have regular flea and worming treatments.

For more information and to apply, visit petsastherapy.org.

highly trained to meet an individual's needs and usually live with that person.

Autism-Assistance Dogs, for example, help autistic people to navigate the world more easily. Many people affected by autism have difficulty sleeping and the dog will sleep on the bed with them, providing Deep Pressure Therapy if needed, helping to promote feelings of safety and relaxation and de-escalate emotional meltdowns. They can help children and adults to dress and organise themselves, while encouraging a more active lifestyle and even enable adults with autism to live alone where otherwise it might not be possible.

It's easy to dismiss or overlook the intelligence and intuition of animals yet they have been on this earth longer than us and have much to offer that we humans can continue to learn from. "As creatures of prey with 55 million years of evolution behind them, horses know a thing or two about working as a highly effective collective," ponders Nina. **S**