

# Pet therapy

A growing number of health professionals now recognise what people who work with animals and pet-owners have known for years: that pets make a powerful difference to our health and wellbeing. By Tanis Taylor

*Photographs by Ben Park*

Animals can be powerful medicine. As modern life hurtles by, a tabby pawing and purring her way onto your lap is a stubborn reminder of the pace to which we could all naturally default. Our dogs tear about the park imploring us to run after a stick with no agenda and, when we oblige, we suddenly realise the wisdom in it. Milan Kundera wrote that animals are our link to paradise. That to sit with a dog on a hillside on a glorious afternoon is to be back in Eden, where doing nothing was not boring, but was peace. Animals do not know evil or jealousy, they are untainted by language and unbothered by how much we earn. They are naïve – all instinct and intuition – and, for many city dwellers, our sole connection to the natural world.

Stroke a cat and good things follow. Unabashed gratitude for

one. The feedback loop of a cat is immediate. Mine, roused from her sleepy reverie, can do nought-to-ecstasy in two seconds flat. Unlike human interactions, with a pet there are no dissemblances or overlays, no confused signals to decode. Animals simply let us know what they want, then nuzzle their thanks into our palm. We, in return, get lowered blood pressure,

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falling cortisol levels, companionship and unconditional love.

Pets safeguard against depression throughout our life and prevent loneliness in later life, while the very act of stroking – touch being the first sense we learn and the last we lose – can reduce our

risk of having a heart attack. Researchers have documented the physiological effect pets can have on humans. A study conducted at UCLA found that dog owners required much less medical care for stress-related problems than non-dog owners. Research at the City Hospital in New York concluded that heart patients who owned pets were significantly more likely to be alive a year after they were discharged from the hospital than those who had no pets. The presence of a pet was found to give a bigger boost to the survival rate than having a spouse or friends. Two studies – one conducted in the UK, and another in the US, which monitored 1,000 patients – discovered that dog owners visited their doctors less often than people who did not own dogs.

In the days before Health and Safety, Florence Nightingale would bring companion animals into ▷





< her hospitals. She found that an animal's ability to intuitively know when someone needed affection or required space could radically improve a patient's psychological and physical health. Today, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a rapidly growing area across the globe.

In the UK, cats and dogs from PAT (Pets As Therapy) visit more than 10,000 people a week – be they patients in stroke units and rehabilitation centres, children with special needs or adults with depression. Elisabeth Forbes, a volunteer with PAT, recalls how her Cairn terrier hounded a young man on a psych ward from his isolation.

*'It's easier to forge a bond with an animal if your trust has been violated or if you've been examined by dozens of people in white coats'*

Withdrawn and non-verbal, he addressed his first communication not to the two-legged therapist standing by his chart, but to Poppy, the four-legged one nuzzling his shins. 'It's easier for many people to forge a bond with an animal,' says Phil Arkow, lecturer in animal-assisted therapy and activities, 'especially if your human trust has been violated or if you've been examined by dozens of people in white coats.'

Recently, NHS therapists have started inviting companion animals up onto the couch during therapy, and new research by the Technion Institute of Technology in Israel shows that AAT can improve quality of life for schizophrenics.

Animals accept without qualification. An animal's attributes >

**NUALA GARDNER, 47, A NURSE, GOT A DOG TO HELP WITH HER SON'S AUTISM.**

Dale was five weeks premature and breach, and I soon realised all was not well. He was just too good. He slept through the night, he didn't cry. By two, he had horrific tantrums. By five he spoke only 12 words. He was diagnosed with severe autism.

One day we visited a friend who had two Scotty dogs. When Dale picked up a ball to throw to them, it was the first time we had ever seen him engage with another living thing. We then got him a golden retriever puppy named Henry. One day, we could not quieten Dale from his ferocious tantrum. On a whim, my



husband pretended to be Henry and said, 'Please, Dale, you're scaring me. Let's go play.' Dale stopped and took Henry outside. After that we used 'Henry's voice' to communicate with Dale. He would do anything Henry said

and his learning and life skills improved dramatically, though he still had no sense of empathy or of loving us. Again, the dog provided the breakthrough. One day, aged seven, Dale had an epic tantrum. I introduced Henry to calm Dale, but he kicked him. We were devastated. Using 'Henry's voice' we said, 'Dale's hurt me and said he doesn't love me'. We put a plaster on Henry, and Dale was so distressed. He cried, 'I don't hate my Henry, I love my Henry'. When I got him into bed, with Henry beside him, he said, 'Mum, Dale loves Henry. And Dale loves his mum and his dad.' That was the biggest breakthrough ever, that he understood the concept of love.

Dale is now 19 and has gone through mainstream education. He has mainstream friends who were unaware of his autism for years, he's in a band, and is doing an HNC. He says he loved Henry's face as it didn't confuse him. For autistics, the many signals of a human face are terrifying to decode. I had a boy with severe autism, rocking in the corner, with no language or eye contact. Henry brought him back. For more information, ring the NAS Autism Helpline on 0845 070 4004 or visit [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk). 'A Friend Like Henry' by Nuala Gardner (£7.99, Hodder & Stoughton) is out now.



## Our pets can exaggerate qualities we already have or, better yet, elicit those conspicuously lacking

◀ are admirable qualities to aspire to in human relationships: they are non-judgemental, offer unconditional acceptance, affection and connection, and live in the present moment. Pets can teach us positive qualities by association. Own a cat, and you will become more nurturing and homely; buy a dog and you will find yourself more active and companionable.

Our pets can exaggerate qualities we already have or, better yet, elicit those conspicuously lacking. My rescue cat Lou – with her daily and unglamorous schedule of eating, evacuating and clawing the furniture – has done wonders for my terror of the mundane. For others, it is precisely these daily, domestic insistences – this necessary outward focus – that keeps the spectre of depression at bay. ■

### SAM QUINLAN, 38, RUNS LEAP, A TREATMENT CENTRE OFFERING EQUINE-ASSISSED PSYCHOTHERAPY.

I suffered from alcoholism from my late teens. In my twenties I was a textbook case – living chaotically, struggling with relationships, intolerant of those who loved me and with no self-worth. By 28 I was on cocaine and living a champagne lifestyle on a lemonade income. I lost everything – my reputation, my integrity, my job, my friends. Then I went home to be nursed back to health by my mum. To make ends meet, I took a job as a cleaner where I also had to look after the horses. It was incredibly poignant. As a child, I had loved horses. It made me realise what I had lost, how far I was from my true self. I would sit in the stables and cry. But the horses helped me recover. They don't judge. I was worried that they wouldn't trust me because I was a bad person. But they accepted me and helped me learn to trust myself. I don't think a person would ever have got that out of me.

Contact LEAP on 07766 910063 or visit [www.leap-etc.co.uk](http://www.leap-etc.co.uk)



### FRANCES WESTON, 48, USES HER DOG IN HER THERAPY PRACTICE.

I met my husband later in life, when the children had left home. We both trained our dog, Tilly, and always walk her together. She was a wedding present from my husband when we married, bought with the express purpose of using her in my



work. She is a pet, much loved at home, but when we put on her lead she is a working dog. I work with emotionally distressed children, who respond well to having something alive and non-threatening to cuddle. Tilly definitely helps clients, particularly children, build a better relationship with me. They see that she trusts me. Some children simply find her presence reassuring, while others automatically stroke her while talking, and she seems to know to stay with them. For anyone lacking in confidence and self-esteem, to enter a room and be greeted enthusiastically by someone who looks to you for guidance is extraordinarily empowering. For more information, visit [www.fw-counselling.co.uk](http://www.fw-counselling.co.uk)

#### RESOURCES

- **Pets As Therapy** (01844 345445, [www.petsastherapy.org](http://www.petsastherapy.org))
- **Animal-assisted Brief Therapy** by Teri Pichot and Marc Coulter, £17.99 (from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))
- **Between Pets And People** by Alan Beck and Aaron Katcher, £17.95 (from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))
- **In The Company Of Animals** by James Serpell, (£16.99, Cambridge University Press)