

Animal-Assisted Therapy: Seeing is Believing  
By Margaret R. Kohut

Only a decade ago, the theory that animals have the ability to relieve the physical and emotional distress of suffering people was not widely accepted. Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) was considered to be an “alternative” method of healing that was on par with aromatherapy, magnetic therapy, and homeopathic or herbal medicine. It was a nice idea; bringing suffering people and affectionate animals together certainly couldn’t hurt, but did it actually help? Medical researchers and social scientists meticulously studied the effects of AAT and the verdict is in: owning a pet or being regularly visited by trained therapy animals in a hospital, rehabilitation center, and nursing home reduces physical and emotional pain, lowers blood pressure, improves mood, and increases the patient’s motivation to heal. No longer considered as a form of “alternative” treatment, AAT has been incorporated into mainstream medicine and is a crucial part of caring for the elderly, psychiatric patients, and chronically or terminally ill patients. AAT has even made its way into 12-Step programs, work with delinquent teenagers, and prison inmates. It’s not unusual to find therapy dogs in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, making the “rounds” to offer unconditional support to those in recovery from alcoholism. Entire juvenile residential treatment facilities have been built around the interactions between child and therapy animals, thus teaching delinquent teenagers empathy, acceptance, and responsibility. Many state and federal correctional facilities have resident therapy animals; their calming influence and offer of acceptance with no regard to the nature of the inmates’ offenses has reduced prison violence and increased their self-confidence and motivation to change criminal thinking and behavior. The link between therapy animals and those in distress is no longer a mystery; it is an accepted fact that is being used more and more often in a wide variety of settings.

Therapy animals are born, not “made.” For some still-unknown reason, some animals instinctively have the ability to seek out people in distress and give them affection, support and encouragement. No amount of training can create a true therapy animal; they either have the gift, or they don’t. Savvy pet owners who are familiar with AAT can easily spot an animal with that special gift. These are animals that are very social and seek interaction with people at every opportunity. They are exceptionally gregarious and prefer emotional bonds with people in distress. They have a subliminal connection with people, and though this bond is difficult to verbally express, therapy animals and their human companions communicate without words, for none are necessary. They understand each other on an emotional level. Skeptics who doubt that animals communicate with people and feel emotions as we do are soon convinced by watching the interaction between a therapy animal and a suffering person.

This real-world example is typical of a therapy animal at work. A four-year-old child had been sexually abused by a male relative. Medical examination confirmed that the little girl had been raped, and the child identified her attacker as a teenage male cousin. But she would say no more; the trauma was simply overwhelming for her to talk about. She couldn’t talk to her loving, supportive parents or a professional therapist. The District Attorney in this jurisdiction needed the child’s statement in order to convict her rapist,

but she was unable and unwilling to discuss the assault with law enforcement personnel. The therapist had an idea: the parents and investigators were asked to leave the room and the therapist brought in an exceptionally gifted therapy dog – a Dachshund named Max. The child was seated on the floor when Max came into the room, and the therapist sat with her back to the child, out of her view. Max went immediately to the child and climbed onto her lap, casting his huge, deep brown eyes directly into hers. The therapist softly said “Tell Max what happened to you; he’s listening and he loves you.” Slowly, the little girl began to tell Max exactly what had happened to her, in specific detail. Max continued to gaze into the child’s face, never moving or taking his eyes from hers. As she spoke of being raped, the child stroked Max’s soft fur and embraced him tightly. Still, Max never moved except to nuzzle the child’s neck. The child knew that Max would not blame or reject her, and wouldn’t abandon her. The interaction was filmed, and later admitted into evidence in the attacker’s trial; he was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Max, an extraordinary therapy dog, had done the impossible and AAT earned the respect of local law enforcement and child protection workers.

Dogs, cats, horses, birds, rabbits...all have potential as therapy animals. Although driven by unquenchable instinct, therapy animals are rigorously trained. They must have good manners, submit to being handled by strangers, be unafraid of elevators and all kinds of medical equipment, be calm in the face of strong emotions, and become accustomed to frequent grooming and bathing. Many therapy dogs are registered as Canine Good Citizens by the American Kennel Club. They may also be trained through the Delta Society and/or Therapy Dogs International. They must be well-behaved on collars and leashes, and many enjoy “dressing up” with scarves, bandanas, and holiday costumes. Therapy dogs are proficient in obeying commands by their handlers to “sit, stay, down, and leave it.” When visiting pediatric wards in hospitals, they are unfazed by youngsters pulling on their ears and tails, not to mention the vigorous hugs offered by the children. Therapy dogs lie quietly beside lonely, frightened elderly patients who take comfort merely in their presence. In physical therapy clinics, the dogs help disabled patients regain range of motion in their arms and legs by walking the dogs up and down hallways and by slowly and steadily brushing their soft coats, re-gaining strength in atrophied muscular tissue. With unfailing courtesy, therapy animals don’t go where they aren’t welcome; patients who are afraid of dogs or cats keep their distance. But those gently wagging tails, smiling faces, and deep, dark eyes are very hard to resist!

Many nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals and assisted living facilities have adopted “Eden environments” where the residents are surrounded by living things; plants, fish tanks, and a resident dog or cat. Sometimes these patients have few, if any, visitors; the companionship of therapy animals is the only emotional contact they have. Instead of lonely isolation, these forgotten, throw-away people have the love of therapy animals that never fail to make their presence known.

Unless you’ve seen a therapy animal in action, it’s difficult to believe that they make such a huge difference in the lives of people in distress. Far too often, we take our canine and feline companions for granted, not really understanding what they do for us until they’re gone from our lives. When your life or someone you love is touched by a therapy

animal, then you understand their incredible gift that is gladly shared with those who need them. The love of a therapy animal is innocent and unselfish; how wonderful the world would be if we were more like them.

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