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# Animal Therapy

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**Animal therapy  
helps resolve  
psychological problems.**



**Pet owners  
have better health.**

## Animal Therapy

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**I**t was observed in the 18th century that psychiatric patients in a British hospital had less anxiety and an improved mood after they interacted positively with rabbits and chickens that roamed the hospital grounds. While psychoanalyzing his patients, Sigmund Freud used a Chow dog to put his patients at ease.

The modern era of animal-assisted therapy began in the 1960s with the emergence of new data on the healing effects of owning a pet. Pet owners tend to have fewer visits to the doctor for medical care and enjoy a quicker recovery after illness or surgery. People who took care of a canary reported greater psychological well-being after three months than people taking care of a potted plant.



The use of pet therapy also appears to reduce the level of pain medication required by some patients. Spending time with a cat or dog is reported to lower one's blood pressure and reduce cortisol (the stress hormone) levels. Just watching fish swimming in a tank in a medical or dental office can lower a person's anxiety.

Research has shown that cardiac patients are more likely to be living still a year after discharge from the hospital if they were pet owners. Only six percent of pet owners died during that first year while 28 percent of those without a pet died. People with depression who swam with dolphins an hour every day reported feeling less depressed after two weeks than those who simply played in the water.

Regular visits from dogs and cats can reduce loneliness and depression among residents of a senior care facility. Animal visits appear to act like anti-anxiety medication without the side effects. Animals have a calming effect on both children and adults facing scary or painful hospital procedures. Pets also help alleviate depression in cancer patients.

Mayo Clinic is one of many medical centers that have an animal therapy program. Mayo's Caring Canines program provides warmth, compassion and support for their patients. The trained dogs provide children with a diversion from their pain. Dogs have been used to help soldiers recover

from the emotional traumas of war.

Horses for Heroes is a government program designed to help soldiers cope with the psychological fallout from their post-traumatic stress disorder when they return from Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, victims of abuse who experience feelings of helplessness can rebuild confidence as they build a relationship with a horse. Learning to ride and control a horse also can build self-esteem in at-risk youth.

Horseback riding can boost the health of persons with debilitating conditions such as multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy. The rhythm of a horse's gait mimics the movement of the human pelvis during walking. This movement promotes a marked improvement in motor function and balance.

Being responsible for and nurturing a pet gives one a feeling of purpose. Pets enable people to look beyond themselves and take the focus off their own problems. Since dog owners regularly walk their pets, they also are more likely to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines.

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