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Unlocking The Healing Power of Pets

What Pets Can Tell You About Your Soul

KURT GASSNER



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BY
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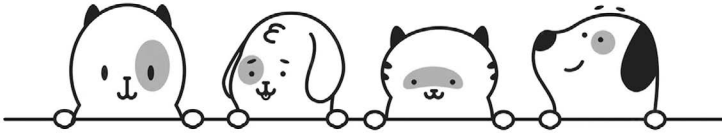
FORWARD

WHY I CAME UP WITH THIS TOPIC...

I became interested in this topic because of my sister, whose story you can read in this book, and my studies of the healing power of hypnotherapies, meditation, and psychology. I fully understand that this is a way of healing, and horses have played a major role in her life. I pray that sometimes she can let go the traumas of the past, and that horses will be an important part in her life, but not THE only defining element in her life.

Animals' Healing Power





INTRODUCTION

It is a little-known fact that animals frequently heal the wounds of loneliness and trauma in our society. Pets can be lifesavers, satisfying not just our needs for companionship and to feel loved but also our deep desire to love in return. Of course, this does not only apply to people who are alone. Even those blessed with many human companions hold a particular affinity for their pets.

Those who own pets are well aware that they make us happy. However, a growing body of scientific data indicates that our pets can help make us healthier. This helps explain why animals—primarily dogs and cats, birds, fish, and even horses—are increasingly used in settings ranging from hospitals and nursing homes to schools, jails, and mental institutions.

Experiencing a wide range of emotions is natural and appropriate, but pets can help curb negative thoughts. According to studies, simply looking into your pet's eyes can reduce your heart rate. Their mere presence is enough to calm you down, warm you up, and make you feel cherished with unconditional love. One beautiful example is companion dogs trained to sense impending panic attacks and assist veterans with other anxiety issues. Equine-assisted therapy (horse-assisted therapy)

is also making great strides toward helping troubled teens and suffering adults. Companion animals assist people with special needs by giving care that humans cannot or will not provide. More and more people recognize the need for “emotional support animals” that serve various functions. It is undeniable that most people find comfort in close contact with friendly animals.

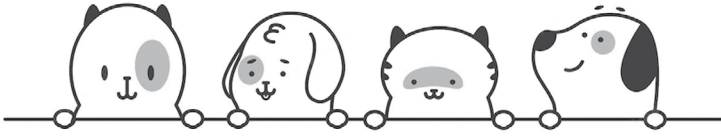
According to research, people who engage with animals may have higher levels of oxytocin (also known as the “trust hormone,” “love hormone,” or “bonding hormone”). In an example, one study discovered that simply making eye contact with their dogs when they returned home from work enhanced oxytocin levels in a group of women. On an emotional level, oxytocin assists mothers in bonding with their newborn offspring, aids human couples in developing a more profound sense of intimacy, and has been connected to improved feelings of self-esteem, optimism, and trust.

In addition to oxytocin, there is some evidence that forming a connection with a friendly animal can lower cortisol, the stress hormone, and increase levels of dopamine, the feel-good brain chemical. Given these advantages, it’s no surprise that animals are now being used in various therapeutic procedures and programs. You’ve probably heard of programs that bring animals directly into hospitals to help cheer up, relax, and entertain patients.

Interestingly, even though animals can improve mental and physical health, we continue to use phrases like “stop acting like an animal,” as if animals were somehow beneath us. Such terminology is scientifically incorrect.

No other animal degrades its surroundings in the same way that people do. In fact, in their natural state, each animal species contributes to the broader ecosystem, aiding in preserving the planet's equilibrium. Only when a foreign species is introduced and becomes invasive, causing an ecological imbalance, do you see a species damaging the environment. So, the true question is: Do we continue to participate in the annihilation of humanity—our own species—and others with whom we share our planet? Or do we begin to act like other animals to achieve balance?

Animals are frequently regarded as hazardous. However, when it comes to the deadliest animals on the earth, those most feared for taking human lives—such as sharks, wolves, and bears—are nowhere near the top of the list. However, human beings are at the absolute pinnacle, ahead of even disease-carrying mosquitos.



THE HEALING POWER OF ANIMALS



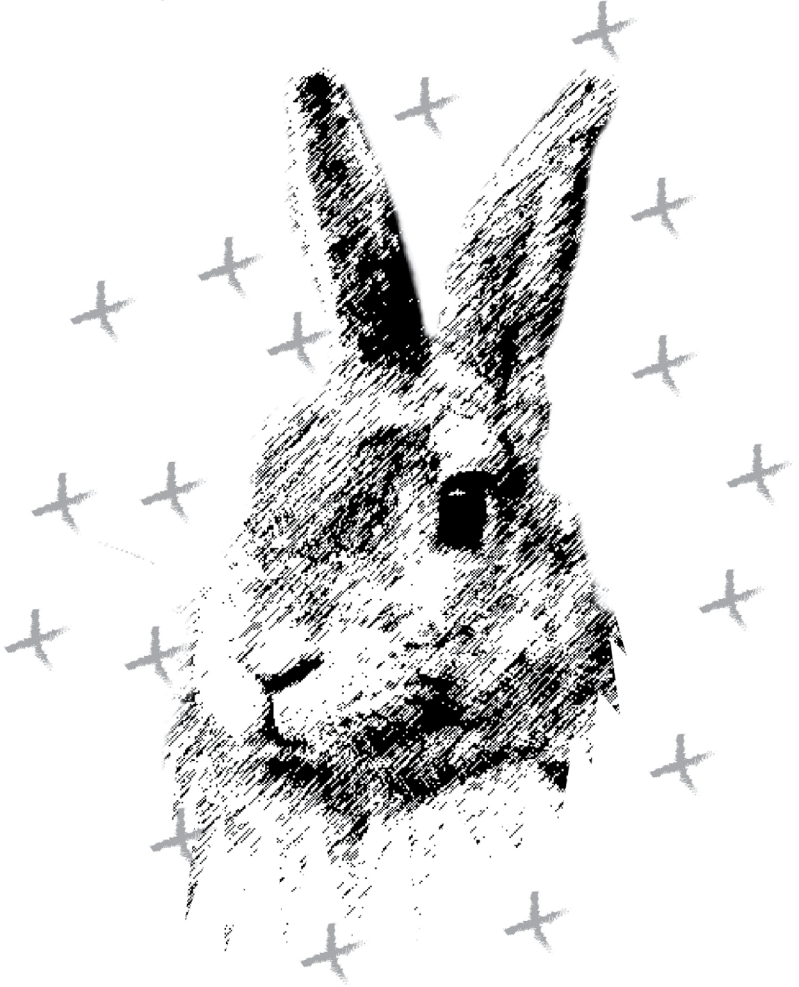
The concept that animals have unique healing abilities is nothing new to us. For many years, their restorative force has been written about, filmed, and documented in various other ways. According to NPR, the use of pets in medicine extends back more than 150 years, as per Aubrey Fine, a clinical psychologist, and professor at California State Polytechnic

University. Studies dating back three decades confirm that the simple act of petting one's dog can lower blood pressure. More recently, studies have focused on the relationship between interacting with animals and the release of the hormone oxytocin, which has powerful effects on the body's abilities to heal and grow new cells.

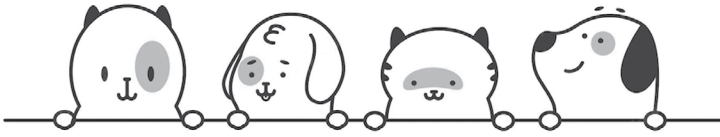
However, this is not where the benefits of having a pet end in terms of healing. Often, those who have pets are more likely to include additional exercise in their routines, something I am well aware of since spending a significant amount of time running through my home and up and down the street with my pets! However, aside from the physical benefits, owning a pet also helps humans realize that love can be unconditional! Animals do not pass judgment or criticize you based on your appearance, the way you dress, your political opinions, or world views. No such things exist in the animal realm; therefore, it is unimportant.

The only thing animals appear to want from their owners (apart from life-sustaining requirements like a fresh supply of food and water) is to spend time with them and love them for who they are—unconditionally. Consider this: What a wonderful life lesson it would be if all of us could act as our pets do—without even trying. To simply BE! To exist unapologetically and fully. There would be no judgment, only love and acceptance. Through this perspective, the immensity of the possibility settles in. Humans should strive to be more like animals by existing in the present moment and living based on unconditional love and acceptance.

Rabbit



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WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

The research clearly indicates that having an animal in your life is beneficial to your physical health. There is no denying that. It is well established that having an animal in our lives can result in fewer doctor visits, reduced blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, and a lower risk of dying from a heart attack. Animals in our homes and hearts make us healthier!

Animals are beneficial for child development.

Many parents believe that adding a four-legged pet to the family is beneficial to the children. They are, for the most part, correct. Children who interact with animals regularly develop stronger self-esteem, participate in more activities such as sports, hobbies, clubs, or housework, and develop more loving behavior. They are also more compassionate toward both animals and humans.

Now, I'm certainly not advocating that everyone rush out and get little Johnny a horse without first considering the cost and time constraints involved. Pets don't work for every family in every living situation, and some pets will work for some but not others. Choosing a pet requires a great deal of planning

and preparation, careful selection, and consideration of your own unique family and housing circumstances. However, if you can find the right pet for your home, adding an animal to your family can provide your children with valuable opportunities to learn about life, responsibility, and nurturing and caring for others.

Animals are good for seniors.

Seniors who own pets are less likely to need to see the doctor frequently, manage their stress better, are more active, and are significantly less lonely.

Animals can be good for our marriages.

According to one study, couples who have a dog at home have developed a stronger bond with each other as well.

While most research indicates the benefits are most prominent when there is a positive interaction between the person and the animal, some studies show that being in the presence of an animal, even ones we don't know or engage with directly, can have a favorable impact. Children were instructed to read aloud in front of an audience in one study. The mere presence of a friendly dog dramatically decreased the children's stress levels.

The company of an animal can also cause us to treat one other more kindly, generously, compassionately, and see each other in a more positive light. For example, people in wheelchairs or with disabilities who have a dog accompanying them experience considerably more positive social contacts and interactions than those unaccompanied. Others are more likely to approach and socialize with them rather than ignore or shun them.

Animals can even make us smarter.

Animals have been studied to see how they can aid in language acquisition and verbal abilities in early childhood, as well as stimulate and drive cognitive development.

Animals help us most during times of challenge.

Animals can improve our physical and emotional health at any time. Still, the following quote from the book *Animals as Teachers and Healers* by Susan Chernak McElroy expresses that this bond is especially powerful when we are feeling vulnerable, stressed, or facing a challenge, loss, or significant change in our lives:

“I was treated for depression in my early twenties, following a suicide attempt. I had shock treatment and intensive medication for two years and never left the house except to see the therapist. During those years, Sunshine was my lone buddy and the only living entity who could communicate with me. I caressed her, hummed to her, murmured to her, and cried into her fur. When it looked like the entire world was sleeping without me, she’d keep an eye on me. She was the only completely secure entity in my universe. I’m now in my forties. Years of good health and faith have given me what I couldn’t have imagined when I was twenty. Sunshine has been gone for a long time. Maybe she didn’t heal me, but she did save me so that I could heal myself with time and strength.”

Again, evidence verifies the remarkable healing potential of an animal’s love and support, which Sunshine’s human companion has expressed. Here are a few additional examples:

- AIDS patients who have pets experience less despair and stress. Their dogs are a massive source of comfort for them and help them believe in their coping abilities.

- Children with autism who have dogs exhibit “more pro-social behaviors and less autistic traits such as self-absorption.”
- Other research has found that animals can act as a buffer variable for a child’s stressful experience, such as war or sexual abuse.
- Several studies have shown that companion animals serve as a buffer against depression, reduce the likelihood of maladaptive behaviors and suicide, motivate individuals to engage in more healthy and constructive activities, and assist us in gaining insight into our emotional experiences, illness, and behavior.
- Finally, having an animal as a companion can help children cope with the terrible illness or loss of a parent.

At times like these, we may seek the assistance of a counselor or another member of the helping professions. It is easy to understand how including animals in these professions could improve growth and healing.

Pet Partners (formerly the Delta Society), a non-profit organization dedicated to exploring and improving human-animal interactions, refers to the inclusion of animals in treatment programs as animal-assisted therapy (AAT). Animal-assisted therapy can be defined as “a goal-oriented intervention in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process, which is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning.” Many practitioners and programs, ranging from therapeutic horseback riding to pet visitation programs in hospitals, are discovering that animals can often reach out to, connect with, and aid people in ways that humans are only beginning to comprehend.