

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Animal Assisted Therapy



Throughout history, man has domesticated animals and has had a close relationship with them as co-workers, guardians, transportation, and companions. Many a poem and story has been written about the love of animals, and they have loved and soothed us down through the ages. Before I continue with today's talk, let me present you a poem, in the hope that you will read it and let it open your mind and heart.

The Power of the Dog
by
Rudyard Kipling

*There is sorrow enough in the natural way
From men and women to fill our day;
And when we are certain of sorrow in store,
Why do we always arrange for more?
Brothers and sisters, I bid you beware
Of giving your heart to a dog to tear.*

*Buy a pup and your money will buy
Love unflinching that cannot lie--
Perfect passion and worship fed
By a kick in the ribs or a pat on the head.
Nevertheless it is hardly fair
To risk your heart to a dog to tear.*

*When the fourteen years which Nature permits
Are closing in asthma, or tumour, or fits,
And the vet's unspoken prescription runs
To lethal chambers or loaded guns,
Then you will find--it's your own affair--
But ... you've given your heart to a dog to tear.*

*When the body that lived at your single will,
With its whimper of welcome, is stilled (how still!)
When the spirit that answered your every mood
Is gone--wherever it goes--for good,
You will discover how much you care,
And will give your heart to a dog to tear.*

*We've sorrow enough in the natural way,
When it comes to burying Christian clay.
Our loves are not given, but only lent,
At compound interest of cent per cent.
Though it is not always the case, I believe,
That the longer we've kept 'em, the more do we grieve:
For, when debts are payable, right or wrong,
A short-term loan is as bad as a long--
So why in--Heaven (before we are there)
Should we give our hearts to a dog to tear?*

Animal Assisted Therapy was “officially” recognized in 1969, when a clinical psychologist, Boris Levinson, published a paper in *Mental Hygiene* entitled “The Dog as Co-Therapist”. He showed that he could make great progress with disturbed children, who were otherwise withdrawn and didn’t communicate, when he brought in his dog, Jingles. This first documentation of an age-old practice brought this technique to the attention of researchers, who have developed this technique into a way of working with children and adults. It is called animal-assisted therapy (AAT) when used by therapists, and is similarly used in school counseling programs, where it is often called animal-assisted activity (AAA).

Therapy dogs, specially trained to work with counselors and their clients, were brought into the traumatic environment just after the school shootings in Oregon and Colorado several years ago, and they are also brought into some schools just to relieve the stress in this particular learning environment. Sometimes students who are feeling stressed come to visit the dogs and then stay and talk to the counselor; it was the counselor whom they wanted to see but found it easier to approach the dog first.

Although AAT is not a true form of therapy, it does lower anxiety and makes it easier for people to visit the counselor, who then uses a variety of therapies that are in his or her repertory of professional treatment techniques. Using animals will work with individual or group therapy, including working with families. Dogs are not the only animals used; sometimes counselors employ horses or cats for the same purpose. Each animal has its own charm and effectiveness in moving the therapeutic process forward. Other animals are also used, including hamsters, rabbits, birds, and even fish. (A beautiful fish tank full of graceful creatures has a wonderfully calming effect on many people. You will find such a tank at the Cumberland Valley Manor in Burkesville, for example.)

Mental health professionals who use animals in therapy should be skillful and knowledgeable in maintaining pet obedience, maintaining a good relationship between the pet and other professional staff, establishing certain counseling goals for the client,

and assessing therapeutic progress. A therapy dog must be well trained, very obedient, and totally non-threatening and gentle.

Some clients find it easier to open up to therapy when an animal is present, and sometimes they talk to the animal while the therapist listens. Animals can help clients get in touch with their own feelings and then find it easier to share these feelings with the therapist. The presence of the animal often makes clients more communicative and social, brightens their mood, allows them to give or receive affection, has been shown to improve memory, provides heightened self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, helps clients become more cooperative and expressive of feelings, increases trust, and teaches appropriate touch. At the same time it can reduce manipulative behavior, anxiety, depression, abusive behavior, and even violence in school settings. An animal can teach about loyalty and responsibility, and can introduce people into the experience of human-animal bonding. In a certain way it heightens the feeling of reality.

During my internship in Tennessee several years ago I had the double privilege of not only working with my supervisor, a gifted psychiatrist, Dr. Chip Fountain, but with his gifted therapy dog, Miss Ellie. Every one of Dr. Chip's patients was pleased to see Miss Ellie and after a minute or two of affectionate interchange, they were ready to open right up to the doctor (who also had a wonderful and warm personal style).

Animal-assisted therapy is a useful tool that can easily fit in and augment the counseling process, while building trust, increasing calmness, and helping the client focus on the tasks of easing a troubled mind, by adding a nonjudgmental friend into the equation.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Recently we cited a tip that told us that open 'green' spaces in urban areas reduced obesity in children. A very recent study done in Glasgow, Scotland, and cited in a top British medical publication (The Lancet, November 2008) stated that access to parks and green space may ease health problems for the poor, and promotes lower mortality rate, faster healing after surgery, and general reduction in stress-related illnesses. For those of us who have access to green spaces, it would be a wise decision indeed to take advantage of this natural inspirational space and merge into the Oneness of Creation, even if just for a brief moment.