

Helping Animals, Healing Ourselves

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There are multiple ways in which animals—especially domesticated animals—help humans to heal and enhance their well-being. Patients and health care providers alike routinely report positive outcomes when animals are used in therapeutic settings. Anecdotal reports confirm animals' ability to alleviate boredom, lift spirits, reduce depression and enhance overall well-being.

A recent study on the effects of therapy dogs used to help elderly patients in a long-term care facility indicated that therapy dogs significantly reduced loneliness of patients. Therapy dogs and other animals have also met with success in hospital AIDS, cancer, and cardiac care wards across the country. Such animals have helped patients significantly lower blood pressure levels, reduce the amount of medications required, and reduce stress. Animals have also had positive effects in physical therapy sessions and assisting social workers to help patients reach clinical goals, improve their memory and increase mobility.

Additionally, animals help to heal people and enhance their well-being working as life-time aids for the wheel-chair bound, guide dogs for the blind, and guard dogs offering protection and reducing stress for seniors. Cancer recognition dogs have shown remarkable ability to provide early warning by detecting cancerous cell clusters long before symptoms appear and victims of domestic violence have reported that their companion animals offer them significant comfort and solace. Few would doubt animals' ability to help heal people who are suffering from physical and/or emotional illness. But did you know that animals can heal us even when we are not really “sick”?

Animals Heal the Soul

Animals helping us is one thing but when people do things to make the world a better place for animals, we all win. When we connect with animals our entire world opens up. There is a heightened sense of awareness of the world and our place in it. And, while we may all be on a different schedule of spiritual and moral enlightenment, connecting with animals offers a heightened sense of awareness about nature and self that is nothing short of medicine for the soul...

Learning What's Really Important

Connecting with and helping animals can help us gain perspective of what's really important in life. Animals help us see the value in just living. Their lesson is pure and uncomplicated, leaving a trenchant awareness that being healthy and happy is all that is important. In short, when we see the world through their eyes, animals help us experience the joy in just living.

Getting in-tune with Nature

Connecting with animals allows us to see life as a whole with great clarity. Once one comes to appreciate that animals have preferences, wants, needs, and feelings like our own it is difficult at best to cling on to the traditional dominant Western paradigm of life where all things in nature are seen as there to serve man. Helping and caring for animals helps us to realize their connection with nature and all of our connection with one another. This awareness often causes a shift in perspective to one where everything—man, woman, children, animals and the environment--are all equal and interconnected points on a circle. In short, the closer we get to animals the more we realize they are similar to ourselves and the more we see we are all connected to them and everything else in nature.

Gaining a healthier sense of time

Owning a traditional Western linear sense of time can be dangerous to our well-being. When everything is seen as having a set beginning and end point, deadlines often become a focal point in our lives. This approach to life often leads to problems with how we set our priorities. Animals can change all that and help bring us back to a healthier sense of time. Rather than focusing on the future they bring us back in to the moment and remind us all that is important is the here-and-now.

Developing a Healthier Sense of Self

There is probably no better source for unconditional love than companion animals. Those people who live with animals know first-hand that it does not matter what you look like, how much is in your checking account, or what your job title is. To your animals you are always the hero. Such unconditional positive regard can be a daily reminder of what really makes us worthy as human beings and what we should truly value about ourselves.

Enhancing Physical Health

Helping or caring about animals can actually be good for our physical health. In the case of companion animals there is increased well-being through exercise (from playing with or walking your animal) as well as secondary health benefits derived from increased laughter and decreased stress levels associated with play.

There are also presumed health benefits derived from not eating animals. Those people who eat vegetarian diets because they care about the suffering of animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses are also creating health benefits for themselves. In addition to what is believed by many to be a healthier diet from lower intakes of fat and antibiotics, some have argued that avoiding meat is healthier because one is not ingesting

the negative effects of the animals' lifetime of pain, stress, and suffering prior to slaughter.

Achieving a Holistic Sense of Being

A sense of purpose and connectedness with the universe and an appreciation for *all* living beings is possible for those who gain a sense of awareness and sensitivity towards animals. Appreciating that animals are not ours to use for our own entertainment (as in forcing them to perform unnatural, demeaning acts in circuses and road shows) not ours to wear for purposes of high-fashion, nor ours to eat or experiment on when alternatives are available allows for a higher level of spiritual and moral development. It also sparks a level of kindness and compassion for all living things that many people do not even realize they are capable of. In short, helping animals by not harming them helps us heal—as individuals, as a society, and as a universe.

A Final Note: Animals have a profound capacity to experience love and joy and to share both, no strings attached. But you don't need to make a long-term commitment to reap the benefits of what they have to offer. You can volunteer to walk a dog or spend time with other types of animals at your local shelter, do temporary foster care with local rescue groups, or stop by FIREPAW for our film and discussion series, free literature, or just to chat. Visit our website at: www.firepaw.org