

THE HEALING POWER OF PETS

In hospitals, at work and at home, emotional-support pets have become increasingly popular therapeutic companions **By Ryan Hatch**

WHO, IN THE MOST STRESSFUL OF TIMES, DO YOU WANT BY your side? Family and friends—yeah, they can be great. But people are people, and our relationships are often complicated. Sometimes we just want the company of someone who gets us without so much as a word. Perhaps it's not crazy, then, when we're in pain or stressed, to seek the comfort of those who don't judge or ask anything of us; they're simply there for us and us for them. Of course, we're talking about animals, our furry and sometimes scaly companions who want nothing else than to be with us and, maybe, snag a treat. While animals are nice at home after a tough day, in practice, trained comfort animals are beginning to play a more instrumental role in places like hospitals and in-patient care centers. The mere presence of animals (mostly dogs) often helps bring a sense of calm to an otherwise crummy situation, and pet therapy's far-ranging benefits impact patients, their families and the place itself. At Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, for example, a team of 30 dogs and their handlers have visited with more than 25,000 patients since 2007. One of the dogs, a golden retriever named Buddy Gill, has amassed nearly 2,500 Instagram followers and can be seen roaming the hospital's halls almost every day.

Buddy Gill cheers up both patients and staff at New York City's Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.



INDEED, EMOTIONAL-SUPPORT ANIMALS appear to be a trend that isn't abating. The National Service Animal Registry reports that nearly 200,000 support animals (again, mostly dogs) are now registered in the U.S., up from 2,400 in 2011. It's unlikely that all of these pets are legitimate necessities, but there is little doubt that animals, even separate from those task-trained for, say, veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, can help assuage anxiety and stress in humans, particularly when they face issues such as serious illness or emotional and physical recovery from an accident. "We're social beings as humans, and when we are experiencing a stressor, we turn to our social relationships," says Megan K. Mueller, an assistant professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. "A source of support for a lot of us is an animal." Animals provide emotional and social comfort that can't always be replicated by our friends and family—experts say that with nearly 70% of households owning some type of pet, our furry and scaly friends frequently top the list when patients request visitors.

Why do animals help so much in times of stress? Reasons abound, but professionals say common themes persist. "In our post-intervention interviews with the families, we ask if the dog helped or facilitated communication, and overwhelmingly they say, 'Oh, yes,'" says Mary Jo Gilmer, a professor of nursing at Vanderbilt University whose studies include animal behavior with ill children. Gilmer says animals often serve as welcome distractions. A wag of the tail or a glance out the window at a squirrel can help shift attention or conversation away from sickness or pain and elevate the mood, if only temporarily. That they're familiar helps, too, as animals in care centers can remind patients and their families of being home, or at least of being somewhere that isn't a doctor's office. Although experts say "unconditional love" can be a problematic phrase when applied to animals and our relationships with them, most agree that another reason that it's so pleasant to have animals around is their lack of judgment. "That provides us with this really stable emotional support to help us cope with whatever challenges we're facing," says Mueller. To be vulnerable is to be human, but it is sometimes best practiced in the company of animals. Simply touching an animal can relieve stress. The feel-good hormone

oxytocin can increase upon stroking the hair of a dog or rubbing an animal. "It's that connection," says Gilmer. "It's stroking the fur, the tactile sense and the feeling that a child has—this dog loves me." Conversely, cortisol, a stress hormone, has been shown to decrease after time spent with animals, and studies suggest that petting dogs can lower our heart rate.

Dogs are the most common therapy animals, and most research has measured their effects on us. But Mueller says equine studies with humans have also proved insightful, particularly when considering how and where interactions can happen. "With the physical experience of sitting on a horse, there's been some suggestion that it impacts the nervous system and may contribute to regulating your experience of arousal, which will often come up during anxiety and PTSD," she says. "I also think the physical environment is something that you have to consider . . . often these interventions are outside, and there may be something about that." In other words, not only does touching the animal matter, but interacting with them in a more natural habitat may also provide a mood boost.

So why, if animals provide such deep emotional and physical support, isn't there a horse in every hospital foyer and a golden retriever in each room? It isn't so simple. Animals pose certain sanitary and logistical challenges and can unnerve people who aren't used to being in close proximity to animals. Not everyone, for instance, is a dog person, and some patients are allergic. And animals, no matter how well trained, can be unpredictable by nature, anathema to spaces designed to minimize chance. With the practice still relatively young and vulnerable, professional animal handlers seem to understand there's little room for error and typically hold even higher standards for themselves. "We don't allow a dog to eat raw foods because that can lead to contamination of salmonella," Mueller says of the therapy dogs she works with.

Pet therapy is not going to replace primary care in humans anytime soon or probably ever. A carefully considered mix of medication and traditional therapy remains our best bets to improve overall well-being and reduce feelings of anxiety. But animals, when properly employed, prove time and again to exponentially benefit our lives. And we love them. We love what they give us and that we can return the favor. Why deprive ourselves of such joy? □



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PETS BEHAVING BADLY? COULD BE SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Ardenis Perez

IF YOU'VE EVER COME HOME TO A COMPLAINT ABOUT BARKING OR an "accident" from your cat, your pet may have separation anxiety. Dogs and cats of any age can become panicked and destructive when left home alone. "Nearly all separation anxiety results from hyper-attachment to one or more owners," says Elizabeth Stelow, chief of the Behavior Service at the William R. Pritchard Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at the University of California, Davis. Abrupt life changes, such as a recent move or a shift in a pet parent's work schedule, can lead to distress, which animals might express by chewing up household items or scratching door frames. Here's what you can do to help your furry friends feel more at ease.

Practice Short Absences

Introduce gradual departures to make pets less sensitive to your leaving. "Exit for however long your pet can be left home alone comfortably, and then come back in," says Malena DeMartini, a certified dog-behavior consultant. If you're unsure, start with a few seconds and build from there. As you slowly increase the length of time, continually check that your pet remains relaxed. Do this exercise five days a week for a total of about 20 minutes per day.

Use Interactive Feeders

While pets are in their most comfortable area, give them a food dispensing toy (such as a Kong Wobbler) filled with treats. Leave them the feeder as you depart in order to create a positive association with your walking out the door.

Be Cautious with Crating

"Some dogs are already anxious about being left alone and may become even more anxious when

placed in a crate," says DeMartini. This can lead to confinement anxiety—the fear of being in an enclosed environment. If your dog finds crating comforting, lucky you! If not, install a baby gate instead to keep your dog in one area.

Consider Medication

If your pet's anxiety gets worse or you don't notice a change, your vet may prescribe anti-anxiety or antidepressant medication. "Don't view medication as a last resort," says DeMartini. "It can help with the problem sooner rather than later."

Rely on Technology

See what's really going on when your pets are home alone. Using video to record their behavior while you're away can help you spot other signs of separation anxiety, including:

- Panting
- Pacing
- Drooling
- Extensive barking or meowing
- Excessive grooming in cats
- Escape attempts