



The Facts about...

Pets as Therapy

Why is it that animals somehow break down barriers? How can this be used to benefit older people?

The Science

Research suggests that hormonal changes naturally occur when humans and dogs interact and that these could help people cope with depression and certain stress-related disorders.

Preliminary results show that a few minutes of stroking a dog prompts a release of a number of "feel good" hormones in humans, including serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin. Simultaneously, levels of the primary stress hormone cortisol, the adrenal chemical responsible for regulating appetite and cravings for carbohydrates, are decreased.

Pets as Treatment for PTSD

The US Department of Defence found that introducing therapy dogs to ex-servicemen who were struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had benefits including:

- An increase in impulse control
- A reduction in symptoms of stress and depression
- An increase in the ability to express appropriate emotions
- Better quality sleep
- A decrease in the need for pain medication

Pets as Companions

Florence Nightingale wrote that a small pet "is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially." And let's not just stick to dogs - Sigmund Freud, a committed cat lover, said; "Time spent with cats is never wasted."

Perhaps the power of pets is best summed up by George Eliot, who wrote "Animals are such agreeable friends - **they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms.**" It is the unconditional nature of pets' love, the fact that they do not require anything of the person other than just to be there and to be themselves.

Animals are powerful aid to people who are living with dementia or those in care homes who want to be treated as an individual rather than a patient or, worse, a "service user".

Animals Don't Answer Back

Other research shows that talking to a pet, rather than a person, can lower heart rate.

Even in nursing homes, the presence of a dog has been associated with reduced need for medication, improved physical functioning, and improved vital signs – even when patients are suffering from dementia.

The list of benefits includes a reduction in loneliness, agitated behaviour and depression, and an increase in engagement, well-being, nutritional intake and social interaction.

Dogs as a Reading Aid

Pets As Therapy's Read 2 Dogs Project and Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D) programmes are just a few of the many pet therapy schemes operating across the UK.

Reading to dogs has been proved to help children develop literacy skills and build confidence, through both the calming effect the dogs' presence has on children and the fact that the dog will listen to the children read without being judgemental or critical.

Older pet owners walk significantly farther when they walk with a dog, which might contribute to their making fewer visits to the doctor.

Further information:

<http://petsastherapy.org/>

<https://www.themayhew.org/about/local-community-work/working-with-the-elderly-therapaws/>

www.dementiadog.org

<https://equalarts.org.uk/our-work/henpower>

<http://www.cinnamon.org.uk/>

<http://www.alamanda.co.uk/>

<https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/therapy>

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This fact sheet should only be used as a guideline and we recommend you seek professional advice.