



Furry Friends Pet Assisted Therapy Services' mission is to consistently facilitate the delivery of the love and affection of our volunteers and their pets. We enhance the lives and touch the hearts of people with special needs.

## **We're Licking Loneliness!**

### **An Overview of the Benefits of Pet Therapy**

**By: Elan Winkler, Vice President,**

**Furry Friends Pet Assisted Therapy Services**

#### **Informal Research**

I am not a psychologist. Nor am I a professional researcher. I am simply a person with a pet who loves people. 10 years ago I started volunteering with Furry Friends Pet Assisted Therapy Services so that I could share that love with people in need in our community.

In researching data for this paper, I was amazed by the number of organizations and the body of knowledge that has emerged about the benefits of pet therapy. There are literally hundreds of volunteer groups like Furry Friends across the world. There's even an International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, whose mission is to gather together national and regional groups in order to advance the understanding and appreciation of the link between humans and animals.

I also uncovered research that pet therapy is anything but a new fad. In the 1790s, the Quakers at a retreat for the mentally ill in England had patients commune with farm animals, which they felt would be more helpful than the harsh treatment often used on those with psychiatric problems.

#### **Pets Make Us Healthier**

Today's research is, of course, more scientific, but consistent with what the Quakers observed. A study in 1992 of 8,000 Australians reported that pet owners were less likely to get heart disease than their pet-less counterparts. Even though the owners in the study ate more meat and fast-food than non-pet owners, they had lower blood pressure, plasma cholesterol, and triglycerides, and got more exercise. Good news for all of us taco-junkies!

Another study on survival rates for individuals with coronary artery surgery showed that 50 out of 53 pet owners were still alive 1 year after hospitalization compared to only 17 out of 39 persons who did not own pets.

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## **On The Wings of a Sparrow**

A 1998 study of women in Canadian correctional institutions was the source of another amazing pet-related story. Oakwood Forensic Center (formerly known as Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane) is located in Lima, Ohio. One day, it was discovered that a patient had found an injured sparrow and had carried the small bird to a ward housing the hospital's most depressed, non-communicative patients.

Although no wild life or even plants were permitted in wards at that time, attendants and patients alike joined in the conspiracy to keep this bird regardless of rules. Patients adopted the bird -- and the results were remarkable.

Despondent and non-communicative men began catching insects for the small sparrow and caring for it. For the first time in this ward for the severely disturbed, patients began acting as a group and relating openly with staff.

Based on this amazing experience, the facility implemented a formal pet therapy program, including measuring results and documenting patient progress. The study found the following amazing results within the first 90 days of the program:

1. Improved self-esteem
2. Provided non-threatening, non-judgmental affection
3. Stimulated a responsible attitude within the pet caretaker
4. Catalyzed communication
5. Improved the atmosphere
6. Provided a new focus of attraction
7. Provided a necessary diversion
8. Provided needed companionship

## **Benefits Most Than Just the Patients**

One other thing came out of the research that I didn't expect to find. However, when I thought about it, I realized that it should have been obvious from the start. And that's the benefit of pet therapy to caregivers. When patients are happier, healthier and calmer, it eases the burden on those having to care for them.

Family members also share in the benefits of pet therapy. Our volunteers to hospice units report that it's more often than not the families that pet the animals and share stories with the volunteers. Having an animal around restores a sense of normality to their lives even in difficult times.

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## Personal Stories

The research I uncovered just reinforced the personal experiences I've had with Furry Friends. These are stories that all Furry Friends members have experienced:

- Patients who won't talk to a person will talk to an animal
- People who are bitter and angry show love when an animal comes into their lives
- Non-responsive patients will move their own limbs just to keep touching an animal
- Children who have lost loved ones feel safe in loving an animal
- Lonely patients, relieved of boredom and stress, smile just to see an animal come into their room
- Children with physical disabilities throw toys for animals to fetch
- Dementia patients relive happier times when animals were a part of their lives

## Web Sites with Information on Animal Assisted Therapy

The Internet has a wealth of information about pet therapy and the organizations that participate in this wonderful work. Here are links to just a few examples:

- Visiting Pets and Animal Assisted Therapy  
<http://www.dogplay.com/Activities/Therapy/therapy.html>
- International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations  
<http://www.iahaio.org/>
- Delta Society  
[www.deltasociety.org/](http://www.deltasociety.org/)
- Therapy Dogs International  
[www.tdi-dog.org/](http://www.tdi-dog.org/)
- Pets and People: Companions in Therapy and Service  
<http://www.petsandpeople.org/define.htm>
- Other California pet therapy organizations  
<http://www.deltasociety.org/CoPartner.htm#ca>
- Open Directory Project; a listing of many sites and services available  
[http://dmoz.org/Recreation/Pets/Animal\\_Assisted\\_Therapy/](http://dmoz.org/Recreation/Pets/Animal_Assisted_Therapy/)

## Conclusion

It's now well accepted that animals enrich our lives in so many ways. By providing unconditional love and acceptance, animals help our self-esteem, our outlook on life and even our physical well-being. Not bad for just being four legs and a tail!

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