

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Pet Therapy \*

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Clinical psychologist Aubrey Fine (California State Polytechnic University) had a 7-year-old client who refused to speak. While talking with her parents, he noticed that his dog fascinated her. Fine signaled the golden retriever to move away from the girl. He told the girl, *"If you want to see the dog, all you need to do is call her."* The girl did and hasn't stopped talking since.

The girl's parents were astonished, but Fine wasn't. Research has indicated that pets have a powerful effect on people's mental health. It doesn't make any difference if it is in therapy or just as companions in everyday life. Fine not only uses his dog, but he also uses several tanks of fish to soothe agitated feelings. Fine notes, *"Some psychologists wouldn't want dog hair on the rug, but having animals around makes the office seem friendlier."*

One of the first uses of animals was therapeutic horseback riding in Germany in the 1960s. In the United States in the 1980s, physical therapists and social workers were the main groups using pet therapy. Recently more psychologists have started to make use of animals in their work.

Besides providing a friendlier atmosphere, animals help Fine to reach his younger patients. It gives children a more comfortable way to talk about uncomfortable subjects. For example, he uses encaged cockatoos in his office. Children typically try to pet the birds, who fly away. This allows Fine to bring up the topic of *"unwanted touches"* with the child. In turn, the child finds it easier to talk about unwanted touching or abusive relationships. Children find it easier to discuss uncomfortable topics when they are associated with animals.

Psychologist Joseph E. Struckus (Litchfield, CN) used animals in a 12-week volunteer visitation program in a nursing home. He tested the effectiveness of animals in improving the well being of residents. Paired for age and disability level, 25 subjects received twice-weekly visits from volunteers who brought along their pets. The other group of 25 received similar visits, but no animals were involved. With the animals, the residents had less depression, anxiety and confusion. They also displayed more prosocial (friendly and helpful) behavior. Even three months after the visits ceased, the group visited with animals was 40% less depressed than the other group. According to Struckus, *"Animals facilitate a level of communication that might not be possible otherwise."*

Animals can have a therapeutic effect in everyday life. Karen Allen, a research psychologist at the State University of New York at Buffalo, knows this from personal experience. When she was frightened by a horror movie on TV, she noticed how she relaxed when her St. Bernard jumped on the couch with her. Since then, she has done several studies on pets' ability to comfort their owners.

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### **Pets positively influence the emotional and physical health of their owners.**

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In her most recent study, Allen found that dogs were a better source of social support than spouses. In the company of their spouses, dogs or both, 240 people were subjected to a variety of stressors. Their response to stress was greatest with the spouse present and least when the dogs were there. With the dogs, heartbeats were about 30 beats per minute slower than those who had spouses present. This difference occurred, even though spouses were allowed to offer whatever support they wanted during the stress periods. Allen believes this is because a non-evaluative bond exists with pets.

*"We think it's because dogs are nonjudgmental. Even when spouses aren't judgmental, you perceive them as being evaluative.... It's the bond you have with the animal. It probably wouldn't matter if it was an iguana, if you felt that way about it."*

Psychological studies also link pets with increased physical health. Psychologist Judith M. Siegel (School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles) investigated older people and the effect of pets on visits to their physicians. She investigated 1,000 members of a health maintenance organization (HMO). Since all subjects were on Medicare, there was no financial problem in seeking a physician's help.

Siegel found the elderly had significantly fewer trips to their doctors, if they owned pets. As in other studies, she found that — as stress increased — visits to their doctors increased. However, Siegel only found this increase in visits among people who had *no pets*. According to Siegel, *"Pets had a buffering effect even as stress increased. By reducing stress, pets also had an impact on the utilization of doctors' services."*

However, this does not mean that everyone under stress should get a pet. Siegel believes they need to desire a pet.

*"It's not so much that people should rush out and get pets unless they really want them. But for those who do have pets, it's a very important connection."*

However, if you really want to get a pet, one good source is your local **Humane Society**. They have lots of pet therapists there.

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\* Adapted from Rebecca Clay's "Research reveals the health benefits of pet ownership," [\*The APA Monitor\*](#), August, 1997, pages 14-15.