

ANIMAL MAGIC

The therapeutic benefits of animals to people with mental ill health is increasingly being recognised and becoming a more common part of services. Dr Daniel Allen reports

Dr Daniel Allen is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society – he describes himself as an animal geographer. He is a regular columnist for *Small Furry Pets* and *Practical Reptile Keeping*, and founder of Pet Nation. He has written two books, *Otter* (Reaktion Books, 2010) and *The Nature Magpie* (Icon Books, 2013). His current academic research focuses on pet therapy, please contact Daniel if you are interested in being involved at www.dranielallen.co.uk.

Engaging with the natural world has long been appreciated as a way of making us feel better. This happens because people have an innately emotional affinity with all other life forms, according to American sociobiologist Edward O Wilson. In his book *Biophilia* (1984), Wilson explains: “The more we know of other forms of life, the more we enjoy and respect ourselves.” By placing nature over nurture, Wilson’s concept was met with scepticism and resistance. But the idea of having an affiliation with nature has far fewer critics.

Nature writer Richard Mabey has felt totally disconnected from the natural world for periods of his life. The author makes no secret that severe depression was the cause. In his 2005 memoir *Nature Cure*, Mabey recounts an emotional journey charting his darkest moments and slow recovery. A rediscovery of nature proved to be the catalyst for the healing process: “What healed me, I think, was... a sense of being taken not out of myself but back in, of nature entering me, firing up the wild bits of my imagination.”

Closer to home, the power of nature in the form of pets should not be underestimated. Domesticated animals are being increasingly utilised as participants in a variety of mental health programmes. For instance, UK charity

Pets as Therapy (PAT) started providing registered dogs and cats for therapeutic visits in 1983. The charity now has more than 4,500 dogs and 108 cats on its books, which meet some 130,000 people a week. Offering companionship, happy associations and unconditional love, this is undoubtedly a beneficial service.

More than just petting

There is no questioning the fact that pets make us smile, laugh and happy. But pet therapy, also known as animal assisted therapy, is changing. It is no longer just a case of happy hounds being petted in hospices, and friendly felines rubbing against the legs of elderly residents in care homes. Different animals are helping to address a variety of mental health and human development needs.

Horses are a fine example. The US-based organisation Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) trained 1,500 therapists in Britain in 2011. When asked why they have singled out horses, EAGALA state: “Naturally intimidating to many, horses are large and powerful. This creates a natural opportunity for some to overcome fear and develop confidence. Working alongside a horse, in spite of those fears, creates confidence and provides wonderful insight when dealing with other intimidating and challenging situations in

life.” The capacity to gently break personal boundaries and facilitate individual development is the key.

UK charity Strength in Horses agrees: “Interacting with such a powerful and spirited animal instils a sense of self-worth and self-confidence. In particular, this benefits those people who as a result of prolonged mental distress and/or abuse have often experienced themselves as powerless.”

Broadly speaking, equine assisted therapy is being used to address a variety of emotional, behavioural and relationship issues including parent-child conflict, attachment, childhood trauma, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, self-esteem, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

While not everyone likes dogs, some people are allergic to cats, and others are uncomfortable around horses, there are plenty of other animals to choose from. In 2012, the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association revealed that almost half of all homes in the UK have animal companions, roughly 67 million. This includes about 40 million fish, 7.4 million dogs, 7.3 million cats, 1 million indoor birds, 1 million rabbits, 400,000 hamsters, 300,000 lizards, 200,000 frogs and toads, 200,000 snakes, 200,000 tortoises and more. Pet therapy pioneers have recognised these changes to pet ownership and embraced the therapeutic work non-traditional companion animals can offer.

Critterish Allsorts

Critterish Allsorts is an independent animal assisted therapy and education services provider in the UK. Dale Preece-Kelly started the company in 2010 after suffering a heart attack. A long-time enthusiast of exotic pets, he took his hobby to the next level by turning it into a successful business. Initially providing services to schools and the general public for education, Critterish Allsorts now also works with mental health patients, delivering animal assisted therapy sessions with occupational therapists and psychologists.

“In our therapy work, we do not just use cats and dogs. We believe that all animals can be therapeutic,” Preece-Kelly explains. “Snakes and certain lizards can be therapeutic, as can tortoises. Other fluffy animals also have their worth when it comes to helping people with their inner struggles. It’s what works for the individual.” Skunks, lizards, tortoises, snakes and spiders now frequent medium-high secure mental health hospitals, and interact with individuals suffering from high spectrum autism, anxiety, depression and paranoid schizophrenia.

“No two sessions are the same, and they are always tailored to suit the needs of the individual or group.” Preece-Kelly continues. “Therapy is required to bring out different aspects of people’s personalities. Animals do this in various ways and therefore each case is judged on its own merits.”

Each session does share core principles: “Interaction with animals stimulates and reduces levels of negative emotion. The key is interaction: stroking, touching, playing, watching,” says Preece-Kelly.

For the patients this not only reduces blood pressure, it also releases naturally occurring feel-good hormones. In turn, stress and anxiety levels are reduced, and those involved become more mentally alert, increasingly relaxed and less sensitive to pain. With an increased heart rate, adrenalin output and a feeling of personal achievement, this emotion turns into excitement.

For instance, those with little contact with reptiles have preconceptions of snakes and lizards as scary or aggressive. In therapy clients must therefore overcome their personal anxiety and uncertainty, which is positive. “I see it working in two stages. It is like double-strength therapy.” Preece-Kelly explains. “Plus, with a snake, you have the added bonus of a neck massage, gained from the movement of the snake on your limbs. This is highly relaxing, and as you stroke the animal, your heart rate begins to lower too.”

Asked for his views on reptile assisted therapy, zoologist and TV personality Dr Desmond Morris told *Practical Reptile Keeping*: “I think the shock of finding out how attractive these animals are, after all the bad press they have had, works wonders when they are encountered up close for the first time.”

The use of exotic species in animal assisted therapy is vital. Since childhood, everybody has had their own personal experiences with animals. With this in mind, the presence of a variety of exotic species is more likely to trigger individual memories and make them more receptive to therapy and more likely to interact with counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists.

Animals are a well-known ‘social lubricant’, stimulating those who may be shy or have issues socialising or communicating to socialise more readily; maybe discussing the animal present, or even their past animal experiences, with people they may not otherwise interact with. This leads to an increase in confidence and a greater feeling of acceptance within their community and society in general – two key factors that help mental health issues to improve.

Preece-Kelly has many examples of this. One client is known for being violent and abusive to staff but when sharing time with a tortoise their behaviour changes and the individual becomes approachable, even sociable with staff.

Another client had popped their head into Preece-Kelly’s sessions every week for six months, scanned the room then returned to their room showing little interest. But when this person saw a skunk called Stoosh, the client went straight to her, started talking about skunks, stroking her and chatting with staff members. The client now looks forward to Critterish Allsorts’ visits. Perhaps this person enjoyed *Pepe Le Pew* cartoons as a child? But whatever the reason why that animal is important to that individual – it will come from past experience – the fact the encounter improved mental wellbeing for that moment is important.

Ad hoc sessions provide a fleeting glimpse of what could be, but only have a momentary effect. The long-term and lasting effects of animal assisted therapy come from regular and sustained exposure to the animals over many sessions (as Critterish Allsorts do, via their weekly contractual visits to psychiatric hospitals). This is key to improving mental wellbeing on a more permanent basis.

American psychologist Harold Herzog summed up the situation perfectly in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2011): “Whether, and under what circumstances, pets make people happier and healthier is unclear. It is, however, clear that animals play a role in nearly every aspect of human psychological and cultural life. And our attitudes and behaviours toward and relationships with other species offer a unique window into many aspects of human nature.”

But if we want to start looking through that window into the imaginations of those with mental health issues, more research is required. ■

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Note: Parts of this article have been reproduced from Daniel Allen’s book *The Nature Magpie* (Icon Books, 2013), and his article ‘Pet therapy with reptiles’, *Practical Reptile Keeping*, October 2012, pp. 8–10.

Critterish Allsorts would like to see pet therapy become a mainstream, recognised and prescribed treatment for patients with mental health problems, whether mild or severe. To find out more contact Dale Preece-Kelly <http://www.critterishallsorts.co.uk/>