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Popular Article

Role of companion animals in enhancing human wellbeing

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Abstract

This article provides information about the benefits of companion animal-human interactions and their precious bond. Companion animals are those animals who share our homes and lives. They are considered as their owners own families so they enjoy more legal protections than other animals. Companion animals include dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, ferrets, birds, guinea pigs, other small mammals, small reptiles and fish. They provide health benefits to humans such as physical health, mental health, social support and detection of illness such as cancer, seizures, hypoglycemia, reduces risk of cardiovascular diseases, and stress level and depression in humans. Companion animals are powerful means of ameliorating the harmful effects of loneliness. They offer critical social support, reducing loneliness and aiding individuals with conditions like PTSD and autism. Therapeutically, they help prevent and recover from health issues. Companion animals also facilitate social interactions and improve emotional wellbeing through unconditional love and support. Although further research is needed, current evidence strongly suggests that pets improve human wellbeing by reducing loneliness and providing emotional support.

Keywords: Companion animals, human-animal interactions, physical health, mental health, and emotional wellbeing.

Introduction

Companion animals are nonhuman beings with whom humans choose to cohabit for reasons such as companionship and entertainment, rather than for food or profit. Households across the world include companion animals, most commonly domesticated dogs and cats, but also other small domesticated mammals, reptiles, fish, and even insects. Keeping companion animals raises a variety



of ethical issues, both general (in that such issues arise in all human–animal interactions) and specific (concerning the domestication, breeding, and keeping of animals in human homes). This characterization includes most animals voluntarily kept by people in their homes: mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. We take “companion animals” to be a subset of this broader group of pets, and understand companionship as a kind of interactive bond, where humans and animals recognize and are responsive to one another, and seek one another’s company for comfort, consolation, play, and so on. Historically, humans have domesticated animals mainly for their instrumental value (that is, as property, food, and the provision of labour and fibres). At the same time, there is a long history of the use of animals as companions. The Ancient Egyptians had a penchant for cats, monkeys, and falcons. The Ancient Greeks kept dogs as household pets. Certainly, over the course of history, animals have become increasingly important as companions for humans. In many cases, animal companionship has become a human need, never more so than now in large urban centres. Pet keeping is a widespread and well-accepted phenomenon in today’s society. Companion animals can play an enormous role in their owners’ lives. Companion animals, such as dogs and cats, can enhance the health of their human owners and may thus contribute significantly to the health expenditure of our country.

Various roles of companion animals in enhancing human wellbeing

- Mental health benefits
- Therapeutic application
- Physical health benefits
- Social support & Connection
- Emotional wellbeing

Mental health benefits

Poor mental well-being is a significant and common concern; around one in eight adults live with a mental health problem. Social relationships are credited with improving well-being, decreasing loneliness, and decreasing mortality risk. Central amongst these relationships may be peoples’ close relationships with their companion animals. More than 50% of homes worldwide have companion animals, and many of these companion animal owners report that their companion animal contributes significant social support, providing a source of help when their mental health is poor or during emotional distress. Although considerable research has examined the impact of companion animals on mental health and well-being, the results have been variable and inconclusive. Indication of the potential benefit that pets convey to the experience of mental health comes from evidence detailing



the benefits of pet ownership in relation to stress reduction, improved quality of life, and pets as promoters of social and community interaction. Recent work has shed light on the relevance of pets in the social networks of people who have received a diagnosis of a severe and enduring mental health illness (e.g. Schizophrenia and Bipolar disorder) suggesting that pets can be considered alongside other human relationships. Research has focused on formalised animal contact in closed settings such as Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). Multiple reviews have considered AAT in a variety of fields including intellectual disability, autism, general healthcare, and neurorehabilitation, but there are no systematic syntheses of the role and effects of the less structured animal contact provided by pet ownership in open settings for people with mental health condition. Evidence from quantitative studies relating to contribution of pets to emotional work was mixed. There were significant findings for the benefits of canine companionship for military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including effects on reducing feelings of loneliness, depression, worry and irritability, and increased feelings of calmness and there was some evidence for the direct effect of pets on depression and mood through close proximate contact and stroking. Pets provided a safe environment where people can talk without fear of being judged or being a burden to others. This was echoed in work where people reported that their dogs allowed them to express their feelings and clarify their thoughts without the concern that they will interrupt, offer criticism or advice, or betray confidence. Pets provided unconditional love and affection which fostered self-acceptance and congruence. Pets constituted a source of support which people could trust and rely on compared with other social network members; they provided simple relationships free from conflict and they did not overstep boundaries. The latter seems to be particularly beneficial for people with Autism and PTSD (Post traumatic stress disorder).

Therapeutic application

- a. **Companion animals as preventers of ill health:** Pet owners are a healthier cohort of individuals than nonowners. Pet ownership may not only help in the prevention of relatively minor physical ailments but may also reduce the chances of people developing more chronic conditions. Anderson and colleagues, for example, discovered that the risk factor for coronary heart disease was significantly lower for pet owners than nonowners, particularly for males (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992). More recently, Dembicki and Anderson (1996) found lower levels of serum triglycerides (high levels of which are associated with increased risk for heart attacks, e.g., Stavenow & Kjellstrom, 1999) in elderly pet owners compared to nonowners. It must be noted that research exploring the ability of pets to prevent their owners from becoming ill has produced some mixed results. For example,



Parslow and Jorm (2003) found no relationship between pet ownership and reductions in heart disease.

- b. Companion animals as facilitators to recovery from ill health:** A small body of research has explored the ability of pets to facilitate their owners' recovery from ill health. In one of the most widely cited studies in the field, Erika Friedmann and colleagues reported that pet owners were significantly more likely to still be alive 1 year after a heart attack than nonowners (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980). These results, however, have not been replicated by others. Moreover, this work has been criticized for its statistical methods (Wright & Moore, 1982) and lack of control for other potential risk factors, for example, social support, personality type, and socioeconomic status (see Bergler, 1988).
- c. Companion Animals as Detectors of Disease:** Some attention has been directed toward the ability of companion animals, and notably dogs, to serve as "early warning systems" for certain types of underlying physical ailment in humans such as cancer, epilepsy, and diabetes.
- d. Cancer Detection:** Cancer claims the lives of millions of people every year, often because symptoms of the disease are noticed too late for effective intervention. Lately, there has been some suggestion that the domestic dog may serve as a useful early warning, or screening, system, for people with cancerous tumours. The authors of this study reported the case of a mongrel that persistently sniffed at a mole on its owner's leg; the lesion later turned out to be malignant. Tumours typically produce volatile compounds (e.g., alkanes and benzene derivatives) that are released into the atmosphere through routes including breath, sweat, and urine (e.g., Di Natale et al., 2003; Phillips et al., 2003). Very recently, it has been hypothesized that the olfactory detection of human cancer by dogs may be based on major histocompatibility complex Odor components (Balseiro & Correia, 2006).
- e. Seizure Detection:** Seizures can result in serious injury; however, their unpredictable nature is often a greater problem. Many sufferers of the condition are unaware that they are about to have a seizure and may show no outward signs that can be detected by even their close family or friends. This can lead to demoralization, frustration, and anxiety, not only in the person with epilepsy but also in those around them. Dogs can, relatively reliably, predict the onset of seizures in their human owners, in some cases up to 45 minutes in advance. This ability appears to be inherent in some animals; however, many dogs are now being trained by specialist organizations (e.g., Personal Assistance Dogs, UK) to monitor their human



owners for outward signs of an imminent seizure and to react in an appropriate manner (e.g., barking or pawing) if a seizure is predicted. Observations of dogs by trainers indicate that seizure alerting may be primarily based on visual signals such as facial expressions, postures, and general behaviour.

- f. Hypoglycaemia Detection:** Hypoglycaemia is a common and potentially hazardous complication of diabetes, usually occurring in individuals with Type 1 (or increasingly Type 2) diabetes on insulin. The condition typically results in physiological effects arising from the attempt to restore glucose levels (sympathetico-adrenal response) such as fear, tremor, tachycardia, and sweating, and a critical lack of glucose to the nervous tissue (neuroglycopenia) leading to behavioural change, fits, or coma. Wells and associates (2008) found that many dogs exhibited “alert” behavior when their owners were going “low” while asleep, and presumably emitting no cues other than olfactory ones. In most of these cases, the dog slept in another room of the house, and in some situations the door of the owner’s bedroom was closed, forcing the animal to scratch or paw at the obstacle. Increases in sweating have been repeatedly noted in hypoglycemic individuals.

Physical Health benefits

Companion animals may be able to improve our short-term physical health (i.e., offer health benefits lasting for seconds or minutes). The action of stroking or petting an animal has repeatedly been shown to cause transient decreases in blood pressure and/or heart rate. Lower blood pressure responses to the stressor of reading aloud were found when participants watched fish swimming in an aquarium, compared to when looking at a plant-filled aquarium with no fish, or staring directly at a blank wall. Video recordings of fish, birds, and monkeys buffered participants from the stressor of reading aloud significantly more than exposure to moving images of people or blank television screens. Indirect exposure to pet allergens during childhood may infer a lower risk of developing allergic sensitization to these materials.

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Social support & Connection

Psychological wellbeing may be facilitated by pets indirectly through the facilitation of interpersonal social contacts. Pets, in particular dogs, have long been noted for their socializing role. For example, walking with a dog result in a significantly higher number of chance conversations with strangers than walking alone. This so-called social catalysis, or lubrication. A woman sitting in a park received significantly more social approaches from passers-by when she was accompanied by a rabbit or turtle, than when she sat alone blowing bubbles or with an operational television set. Numerous organizations now train dogs, and other animals (e.g., monkeys), to enhance the visual, auditory, and/or mobility capabilities of their owners. In addition to achieving the goal for which they were purposely trained, assistance animals have been shown to act as strong social catalysts, helping to normalize relationships with other people. Hart, Hart, and Bergin (1987), for example, reported that wheelchair users received a median of eight friendly approaches from unfamiliar adults per shopping trip when they were accompanied by their service dogs, but typically only one friendly approach if the animal was not present.

Emotional wellbeing

Individuals benefit from the presence of companion animals (termed the “pet-effect”), recent evidence suggests that the nature of this association is diverse and complex and that many of the studies performed so far are subject to methodological constraints. owning a companion animal has been associated with lower levels of depression (Clark Kline, 2010) and with higher levels of life satisfaction (Jacobs Bao & Schreer, 2016). Pet-owners experience higher levels of emotional wellbeing than people who do not own a companion animal. Different aspects of the human–animal relationship seem to influence different aspects of emotional wellbeing. There were significant findings for the benefits of canine companionship for military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including effects on reducing feelings of loneliness, depression, worry and irritability, and increased feelings of calmness and there was some evidence for the direct effect of pets on depression and mood through close proximate contact and stroking. Pets had an effect in mediating the relationship between AIDS diagnosis and depression and that there was a weak trend towards dogs being more successful in this role than cats. Pets were able to provide unique emotional support as a result of their ability to respond to their owners in an intuitive way, especially in times of crisis and periods of active symptoms. A related impact on loneliness was achieved through physical contact which reduced feelings of isolation, providing a source of physical warmth and companionship, and by providing opportunities for communication. Pets provided a safe environment



where people can talk without fear of being judged or being a burden to others. This was echoed in work where people reported that their dogs allowed them to express their feelings and clarify their thoughts without the concern that they will interrupt, offer criticism or advice, or betray confidence.

Conclusion

The evidence for the ability of animals to promote physical and psychological health in humans and facilitate the diagnosis and treatment of specific chronic diseases. Although the evidence for a direct causal association between human well-being and companion animals is still not conclusive, the literature reviewed above is largely supportive of the widely held belief that “pets are good for us.” Unfortunately, not all of the studies carried out in this area have been methodologically robust or allow for generalized conclusions. Pets provide benefits to those with mental health conditions through the intensity of connectivity with their owners and the contribution they make to emotional support in times of crises together with their ability to help manage symptoms when they arise. There is a general consensus among researchers that given supportive social environments, companion animals can be a powerful means of ameliorating the harmful effects of loneliness and alienation of those who are oppressed by these sinister epidemics. We are conscious of the limitations of our research methodology and the effects of these on the validity of our findings. However, it is a beginning and may well lead to further research with a much greater survey pool and with appropriate weighting given to each section of society. We remain totally committed to the notion that animal companions can improve the quality and happiness of those upon whom the shadows of loneliness and alienation fall and those who genuinely love their animals when they travel their life journeys together. Therefore, we have concluded that further rigorous research is required to test this relationship, incorporating outcomes that cover the range of roles pets may have in relation to mental health identified within this review. The research studies included in this review provide a point of debate that services and policy makers may wish to consider in the future.

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