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Health and Happiness: Dogs and Their Therapeutic Value

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HEALTH AND HAPPINESS:
DOGS AND THEIR THERAPEUTIC VALUE

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Science

In the College of Arts and Sciences
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By

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Liz Cleaves, Auntie Dog, aided me in my search for a greater understanding of therapy dogs and their value from my first email request. She opened her studio to me, shared moving personal stories, invited me to observe and participate in a TDI testing session, included me in a therapy visit, and introduced me to many teams of helpful and gracious people with beautiful dogs. I am grateful for her interest, sharing of knowledge, and many kindnesses.

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First in my family I want to thank my mom, dad, brother, and sister who have dealt with my multiple mental breakdowns over the course of these four years. I’ve had a rough time dealing with my mental health and knowing that these four wonderful people were always there for me so I could have a shoulder to cry on got me through. My mom will forever be my biggest hero. Her strength and dedication to her family is inspirational. My dad will always be my rock and I’ll always be his Peanut through thick and thin. Timothy and Alyson, my brother and sister, are only in middle school and I might give them a hard time because that’s what older siblings are for, but they’ll never understand how much I love them and how much they mean to me.
I can’t thank my grandparents enough for all of the help they give me. Whether it is my grandma driving me to all of the different locations for visits because I don’t have a car and helping me with grammar and punctuation or whether it is my grandpa teaching me Photoshop and helping me get reaquainted with my camera, I don’t know where I’d be without these two.

Oh... and... Aunie. You never fail to make me smile and laugh. I know you’ll always love me.
**Introduction**

Dogs are and have always been my favorite animal. They are cute, playful, loving, and very loyal. The number of dog breeds, whether purebred or mixed, is endless. Mixing a German Shepherd and a Doberman Pinscher creates an enormous dog that is extremely protective and loyal, but can be a gentle giant. A well-known dog mix, the Labradoodle, combines a Labrador Retriever and Standard Poodle and produces an extremely intelligent, level-headed, affectionate, playful, energetic, and hypoallergenic dog.

About two years ago, I was diagnosed with general anxiety disorder, in retrospect a condition I believe I have had for a long time. Recently I have become interested in the therapeutic powers of dogs. Being around dogs makes me feel safe and calm; just the sight of them brings a smile and a feeling of peace and happiness. The therapeutic potential of dogs can be seen in children and adults in many settings - learning to read, coping with loss or illness, managing stress and anxiety, experiencing loneliness and isolation. This is a concept I totally understand that piqued my interest to explore and learn more.

As a Communications/Journalism major and Art/Photography minor, I am pleased to accept the recommendation of my advisor(s) to tell this story through interviews, site visits, and photos. This project briefly reviews the history of therapy dogs, discusses the process of certifying therapy teams, and witnesses the special bond between canine and human through interviews with therapy teams and personal interactions between teams and people of various ages captured in photographs during site visits. It also examines the observations and continuing study of dog therapy by medical professionals.
A Brief History: Where It Began

Florence Nightingale is considered to be the founder of modern nursing. In the late 1800s, she first observed the benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) in how small pets helped reduce anxiety in children and adults living in psychiatric hospitals. Famed psychotherapist Sigmund Freud theorized in the 1830s that dogs had a “special sense.” He believed dogs could sense tension and would measure it by observing how far or close the dog stood by a person. He was a strong supporter of AAT and used his dog Jofi during therapy sessions.

Smoky, a Yorkshire Terrier, is considered to be the first therapy dog. Born in 1943, Smoky was small in stature, weighed four pounds and stood seven inches tall, but her story of serving in WWII is much larger. Found in a foxhole in New Guinea by an American soldier she was taken back to camp and sold to Corporal William Wynne for $6.44. Smoky went through combat fighting in the South Pacific, became part of the 5th Air Force, 26th Photo Recon Squadron, and went on 12 sea and air photo and rescue missions. In total, Smoky survived 150 air raids on New Guinea, a typhoon that hit Okinawa, Japan, parachuted from a 30-foot tree in a specially made parachute, warned Wynne and eight of his men of incoming shells on the transport ship, and was awarded 8 battle and 12 combat mission stars. She played a role in helping with the building of a critical airfield. A telegraph wire had to be laid but the wire was only eight inches from the ground and no soldier could fit under it. Wynne tied the wire to Smoky’s collar and she ran to the other end of the pipe. This wire placement made it possible for 250 men and equipment to keep 40 aircrafts in operation and maintain a safe area.
But, Smoky was so much more. She served in another very significant way. She learned many tricks which entertained and boosted the morale of the soldiers in hospitals. In the summer of 1944, after her work with nurses of the 233rd Station Hospital who cared for casualties, Smoky was given permission to work as a therapy dog by Commanding Officer Major Dr. Charles Mayo, who later founded the Mayo Clinic. She worked for 12 years.


Statue of Smoky in Lakewood, Ohio where she is buried


Smoky doing work at the 233rd Station Hospital with Dr. Charles W. Mayo of the Mayo Clinic
Certification of Therapy Dogs

A therapy dog and its handler are a team. This team is trained and certified to provide affection and comfort to people. The places they work include, but are not limited to: hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, schools, hospices, and disaster areas. Different therapy animal organizations each have their own requirements.

Therapy Dogs International (TDI), the oldest and largest therapy dog organization in the United States, was founded in 1976 in New Jersey by Elaine Smith. She was a nurse who got the idea of therapy dogs when a chaplain came in with his Golden Retriever for visits. Patients and staff had a positive reaction to the presence of the dog. The first TDI visit was in New Jersey with five owners and six dogs, five German Shepherds, and a Collie.

Pet Partners is the nation’s largest nonprofit organization that registers handlers of multiple species as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted therapy. Unlike TDI, animals certified by Pet Partners must be retested/certified every two years and handlers are required to take certain training classes.

The testing process for both organizations is similar and requires that the team, both handler and animal, be evaluated. Examples of requirements of different organizations include:

- Minimum age requirements for handler and animal
- Teams serve as volunteers without compensation
- Only one handler and one animal at a time
- Animal must be kept on a leash of a maximum length while working
- Animal must be bathed before each therapy visit
- Animal must be healthy with current vaccinations
- Animal must be spayed or neutered; animal cannot be fed a raw protein diet
- Animal and handler must wear ID/identifying garb while working

Therapy work can be very stressful and tiring for a dog so specific time limitations for visits are important.
Auntie Dog Training Studio: A TDI Evaluator, Trainer, Handler

In 2005 Liz Cleaves turned her energy and focus from a successful career in marketing and print to something she loved, dogs. Along with training her own award-winning dogs, she is “Auntie Dog”. Cleaves owns and operates Auntie Dog Training Studio in Tewksbury, Massachusetts, has three certified therapy dogs, is a trainer, TDI evaluator, and outstanding advocate for the value and benefits of therapy dog teams. Cleaves said:

I personally get a deeper and better relationship with my dogs doing therapy work and it gives me the opportunity to give them something to do that they like to do that doesn’t involve the strict rules of competition, so they get to be dogs, but they get to be good dogs.

At a February 26, 2016 TDI testing Cleaves evaluated four groups of four teams each over a period of two hours. Each team, handler and dog, was observed and evaluated from the minute it entered the studio until the completion of all tests. Both handler and dog were required to pass the tests for the team to be certified. The dog was on leash the entire time.

There were 13 tests designed to simulate a visit with a therapy dog at a facility reflecting realistic situation.

The first test was a measure of the dog’s ability to remain quiet and calm while the handler was away for a short amount of time. An assistant, a stranger to the dog, stayed with the dog as the handler left the room. Two tests showcased the dog’s obedience to sit/lay and stay while the handler was on the opposite end of a six-foot leash.

The next test challenged both a handler’s ability to keep the dog’s focus and the dog’s independent ability to not get spooked. The dog walked among several strangers with medical equipment such as crutches, a wheelchair, and a walker simulating the type of facility a team is likely to visit. A crutch was dropped in the dog’s path to test its reaction. Next was an encounter
with a stranger/patient in a wheelchair. The dog visited with the patient and was petted but not allowed to jump up onto the patient. Small dogs were allowed to be placed on the patient’s lap.

Food resistance seemed to be the most difficult for many of the dogs and handlers, and if unsuccessful, it was an automatic failure for team certification. Because in hospitals and nursing homes there are many medicines that can severely injure or sicken a dog, this was the most important test and could not be repeated.

Several more tests examined the dog’s/team’s ability to react to unusual situations. A stranger stepped into the path of the team and cut them off at the last second. The dog had to either sit or make a complete stop. During therapy visits, the team may encounter other therapy dog teams. The team had to pass a demo team (another previously certified team) and the dog being tested could not bark or play with the dog, although sniffing and curious looks were allowed. The team then followed a pattern of turns during which the dog was required to remain close by the handler’s side while being maintained on a loose leash.

For the recall test the dog assumed a down or sit position while the handler walked away holding the other end of a 20-foot loose leash. The handler turned and called the dog and only then could the dog get up and come to the handler.

The final test involved what TDI calls “children playing distraction resistance.” The team was at the outside edge of the room with the dog sitting, standing, or lying down while child assistants played on scooters and bounced balls. The dog could not go after or play with them. This test of obedience was important because some teams visit children’s hospitals, schools, and libraries.
Dogs ranged from a four-pound Yorkshire Terrier to a full-size Bernese Mountain Dog; handlers were male and female of various ages using voice and hand commands. One handler confirmed that purebred German Shepherds and some other Germanic breeds can respond to commands in German if taught by the breeder. Since it is the team, not just the dog, that is certified, Oliver, a German Shepherd, went through the entire process twice, once with each of two handlers. To an observer it seemed likely from the moment of sign-in that some teams would have difficulty given the rapport between handler and dog. Indeed, some of the teams did fail but Cleaves counseled them on how to work with their dogs and encouraged them to test again. Upon passing the team received paperwork to mail to TDI headquarters and a red bandana scarf to wrap around the dog’s neck to signify that the dog is certified and working.

The TDI testing demonstrated that the breed of dog is irrelevant, what matters is its basic temperament and the relationship between human and dog, an almost parent-to-child bond they have. Photos during testing is not allowed but it was possible to photograph some teams after the testing and at a later meeting.
TDI Certified Therapy Teams

Tammy with Beans, German Shepherd, 15 months -
“My father is a quadriplegic from a fall at a restaurant. That incident inspired me to get into therapy dogs.”

Michelle with Charlie, Labrador Retriever/Boxer Mix, 6 years old - Newly certified team
Nancy with Remy, Bernese Mountain Dog, 7 years old -
“It makes me feel good because I see how it makes them feel. The visits calm the patients. It gives them something to look forward to every week. I don’t think there are enough therapy dog teams. I think there’s a huge need for things like this. It’s something nice to do for other people.”
Helena with Karlee, Whippet/Rat Terrier Mix, 3 years old - “There was a man at the Blaire House and he always just sitting there not doing much. I turned to him and asked if he would like to pet the dog and he just looked up at me. So I took his hand, and put it on my dog and he had a big smile.”

Daniel with Spud, Cocker Spaniel/Poodle Mix, 3 years old - “We were in the Alzheimer’s unit at Blaire House and there was a man who had a scraggly nail. It got caught in Spud’s fur and he let out a yelp and the man was all distraught but once Spud calmed down he went right back over as if to say ‘It’s ok.’”
**Liz with Anya, German Shepherd, 2 years old** - “She was sitting next to a patient that was very self-abusive and Anya actually connected with her and she stopped hitting herself for a couple minutes and that’s huge.”

**Liz with Sieben, Doberman Pinscher, 4 years old** - “There was a patient named Michael and he would sit in his wheelchair near the nurses’ station. He wasn’t very verbal but when Sieben would come, he would say ‘dog’ but it would sound more like ‘Dah! Dah!’ Sieben would go up to him and he would touch her (he had some and handicaps and some personality issues, we would say), but when Sieben was there he would get really calm.”
Oliver the German Shepherd tested twice, once with each owner, and passed.

Coco the Yorkshire Terrier and her handler celebrating their passing of the test.
The Blaire House Assisted Living, Tewksbury MA

At a later date Cleaves arranged a therapy visit at The Blaire House Assisted Living and a follow-up session at her studio with some therapy teams. She brought her three dogs, Sieben the Doberman Pinscher, Newman the Boston Terrier, and Anya the German Shepherd. Another team, Helena and her Rat Terrier mix Karlee, joined them.

The common room was filled with men and women anxiously anticipating the weekly visit. Some were eager to hold the smaller dogs and receive their “kisses” while others seemed happy to have Sieben and Anya sit beside them or at their feet to be petted. A familiarity with the dogs, smiling faces, and animated interactions permeated the room.

Three women agreed to talk about their experiences with the dog visits. They collectively agreed they look forward to this event all of the time. It clearly brought back happy memories for them. One woman talked about how she had a very nice dog that helped around her father’s farm. Another said: “The dogs make me feel calm if I feel any stress.”

Emily Cedrone, Activity Director at Blaire House, talked about how the administration decided to allow pet therapy visits:

We had family members bring in their personal dogs to see their loved ones. The visits started to be extended and the dogs began to meet and spend time with other residents. We saw how much the residents loved to interact with the dogs. That had us starting our research into pet therapy.

The administration interviews new residents to determine if they will interact with the dogs. Cedrone explained that most residents go to the lounge to visit the dogs but for those who don’t want to go to the lounge, “I bring the teams around to all three floors to visit the residents. I knock on the door and tell the resident that they have a four-legged visitor and the resident makes the choice if he or she wants to see the dog at that time.” Dogs of all sizes visit Blaire
House every Friday plus one Thursday a month. She said some residents like the smaller ones to sit next to them on the sofa but others just love to hug the big ones.

Asked about the value of therapy dogs, Cedrone explained:

Therapy dogs bring such joy to the residents, especially for the memory-care residents. They will make positive emotional and cognitive connections when they are interacting with the dogs. Having the dogs around the residents can and will trigger happy emotions and memories for all the residents, traditional and memory care. This program also gives them something to look forward to because they build relationships with the dogs and their handlers.
Dogs Working at Blaire House

Anya
Newman (Liz is handler, Boston Terrier, 13 years old) - “There was one patient at Tewksbury Hospital that seemed very interested in the dogs and, at the time, all of the dogs I had were big and we couldn’t get a dog close enough to her because she was very restricted in her movement. I got Newman certified for her. It took about 6 or 7 months before she was really into it and now she reaches for him and he’s been visiting her for about 6 years.”
Waggin’ Tales: Reading to Mernie

Jen Sappington and Mernie are regular visitors to the Beaman Memorial Library Children’s Room in West Boylston MA. Mernie is a Golden Retriever/American Labrador mix that is considered a “specialty dog,” meaning she is certified in more than one area. Jen, her handler, has a hard time hearing high-pitched noises and has cerebral palsy. Mernie is trained to alert Jen when the phone goes off, fire alarm sounds, or other noises Jen cannot hear as well as to pick up things such as Jen’s shoes and laundry she drops.

Jen and Mernie are a certified therapy team that works only with children. They provide a safe and non-judgemental atmosphere that encourages children to practice and increase their reading skills and to feel safe and comfortable around dogs. According to TDI’s website, a handler in a learning DVD says that it brings excitement into reading.

The room is also filled with the natural excitement children experience from being around a dog that gets them to open up and socialize. Even though some children can be a bit timid around dogs, Mernie is calm and patient allowing the children to approach her.
Alicia (in pink) reading with Jen and Mernie and her sister Liani
Kathryn Kircher with Murray and Teddy-B,

Long-Time Therapy Team

Kathryn Kircher of Simsbury CT has loved and owned dogs all her life. She retired from her position as an executive assistant at Hartford Hospital’s Cardiac ICU two years ago. During that time Kircher and her now-retired 17½-year-old TDI-certified Silky Terrier, Murray, worked as a team in the hospital’s pet therapy program. Her passion for the program and its value comes alive as she vividly remembers and relates stories about her journeys with Murray.

One day they visited an elderly man in the hospital who really connected with Murray, so much so that she crawled up on the bed and snuggled with him. Kircher got a knock on her office door later that day by a woman thanking Kircher for visiting her dad. He had been depressed and non-communicative for over a week and the visit with her sweet little dog had made him alert and upbeat. “I was personally touched by her visit to me because she expressed much gratitude and even told me that what my Silky Terrier and I were doing ‘is truly a ministry.’”

A second story occurred when Murray was a “Welcome Wagger” at the hospital as her last assignment before she retired. There was a small stethoscope wrapped around her neck.

A small boy, maybe about 4 years old, stopped to pet her. The child picked up the stethoscope and held it to his own chest. Then he asked me if he could kiss her and I said yes. He placed a very gentle kiss atop her little head and then looked up at me and said in a tiny important voice, "I think she likes me.” I assured him that she did and that it was because he was being so gentle with her...THAT is what pet therapy is all about.

Kircher and her rescued miniature, long-haired, black and tan Dachshund, Teddy-B-Mine, also TDI certified, are part of a therapy dog group that visits senior nursing facilities in and around the Springfield, MA area once or twice a month. He has a beautiful, shiny coat and a tail
that mimics a feather duster. Teddy-B has a very calm demeanor and just goes with the flow, or wherever his curious nose takes him.

Landmark at Monastery Heights is a senior living community with independent and assisted living and a special program for the memory impaired in West Springfield, MA. One recent afternoon two therapy dog teams visited, Kircher and Teddy-B and Pat D’Arcy and her male Japanese Chin, Foy. That afternoon, a Bingo game was going on but as soon as it ended, walkers came from all directions to pet and greet Teddy-B and Foy. Residents gently and affectionately touched and cuddled the dogs while reminiscing about pets they once had.

Kircher and D’Arcy were directed to the Alzheimer’s unit, called Morning Star, to visit the residents there. The residents were absolutely smitten with both of these pooches. When the teams returned to the main floor, Tina Tatro, Activity Director, informed them that one of the original women who came over after Bingo is normally a violent Alzheimer’s patient but when the dogs come and visit, she completely changes and that “this is the only time we see her smile.” She also shared that there is one Alzheimer’s patient who doesn’t remember his own family member’s names but knows every dog’s name week to week. “Of all the many activities I plan...our dog team visits are by far the most favorite among residents,” said Tatro.

Sharing her beloved dogs in therapy visits has long been an integral part of Kircher’s life. She said:

I am truly humbled to be a part of the very special, almost sacred, therapy that is happening when an ill or elderly individual is able to touch and talk with a dog. I am honored to share my dogs in this manner. I witness a few minutes when a patient is able to forget his fears and pain and the reasons why he is in the hospital or facility, and just enjoy the dog's company or enjoy remembering dogs in his own life. The visits may be short... but they can be powerful in their benefit. I have long felt that I gain at least as much as I give as I escort my little therapy dogs.
A Visit to Landmark at Monastery Heights
West Springfield MA

Murray taking a stroll.

Teddy-B-Mine enjoying the leaves and sunshine before work.
Playtime over - time to go to work!

Foy hanging out with residents
Carolyn Howe and Phoebe Coqui, her 12-year-old Labradoodle, are one of the therapy dog teams of the Tufts Veterinary School Paws for People program. Howe became involved in dog therapy 16 years ago. Howe’s mother’s residential hospice in Denver had a social worker with a small Golden Retriever, Quincy Mae, who visited there five days a week. Quincy Mae frequented her mother’s room and reminded the mother of her brother’s dog.

For my four siblings and me the therapy dog may have been as therapeutic as she was for my mom. I realized this more after my mom died than while she was still alive, although as deep dog lovers, we knew the dog was a special part of our visits.

Wanting to get a therapy dog, Howe’s research of breeds led her to a Labradoodle. The mix of the Standard Poodle and Labrador Retriever produces a dog that is very intelligent, loves to please people, has a great temperament, and, after a few generations, has the hypoallergenic, non-shedding hair of the Poodle. Howe got Phoebe from a breeder in Toronto in 2003 but it was nine years before time allowed her to train. In August of 2012, Howe and Phoebe were certified as a therapy team through Pet Partners.

Howe and Phoebe now go to the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital (a public psychiatric facility), Abby’s House (one of the first shelters for women in the United States), and the Proctor Elementary School in Northborough, MA, where Phoebe is a R.E.A.D. dog (Reading Education Assistance Dog). Kids receive a bookmark, pictured below, after they have read five books to Phoebe. In addition, they attend stress-relief events and love festivals and open houses. Howe said:

The work Tufts Paws for People does is so important. I can see the difference it makes in the people we visit. But it makes a huge difference in my life, as well. It gets me ‘outside of myself’ when we are there for other people. It has also given me the chance to have a unique relationship with Phoebe.”
When Carolyn and Phoebe are out for a walk, all Carolyn has to say is, “Phoebe! We’re going to go to work!” and Phoebe “smiles,” picks up her pace, and heads for home. When we get to our site, she waltzes in knowing exactly where she has to go.”
Jeanne receiving tons of kisses from Phoebe

Jan helping put some treats in a puzzle for Phoebe to play
PHOEBE

Phoebe was born on November 19, 2003, in Toronto, Canada. She came to live with her "person" when she was a tiny puppy, only 7 1/2 weeks old.

PHOEBE's favorite activity is swimming and chasing sticks in the water. She also loves to be around people of all ages.

Phoebe's favorite foods are salmon, asparagus, and sweet potatoes! Mostly she eats plain old dog food. Of course, she always likes doggie treats!

PHOEBE is a registered therapy dog with Pet Partners and Tufts Paws for People. She is also a Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.).

We were just PAWSing to READ!
What the Experts Are Saying

A Success Story: Hartford Hospital Pet Program

Kelley Boothby, Volunteer Director at Hartford Hospital, oversees the Pet Therapy program. Teams work as lobby greeters, Welcome Waggers, and patient visitors that go everywhere except the operating rooms and labor and delivery.

The program consists of dogs of many mixed breeds, purebreds and rescues, and range from 12 to 175 pounds. Boothby has a Great Pyrenees rescue who seems to particularly like to visit the Epilepsy Unit. They have had two Pit Bulls over the 20-year period, several Bernese Mountain dogs, Border Collies, Poodles, and Golden Retrievers. She said all breeds have been wonderful. Patients and families have sometimes requested a visit from a particular breed for a dying patient and have even asked to have pictures of their visiting dogs on their caskets, she reported.

In an October 2015 Hartford Courant article, Dr. Stuart Markowitz, President of Hartford Hospital, said that “some of the best care he’s delivered has been at the end of a leash.” He brings his Brittany Spaniel, Ubu, one of about 50 certified therapy dogs, on evening and weekend rounds. The Hartford Hospital Pet Therapy Program that began with a team of three Huskies rounding on nursing units has existed and grown over more than 20 years.

Markowitz reported in the article that he has witnessed the calming effect of these therapy visits on patients, their families and staff. “The companionship that animals bring is vital to all of us. It is important to our spirit. We have seen better physical outcomes because of it.” He has experienced many patients who talk about the visits long after and notes, “There is absolutely a mind-body connection.”
Boothby explained that dogs visit almost every day. Hartford’s program allows a patient or family member to request a visit and clinical staff to electronically order visits like for medication. The usual visit is 5 minutes but some can be quite extended.

“The transplant docs think their patients need the visits more because they are usually here for longer periods,” Boothby explained. “We had one family member run out of a patient room during one visit...the patient had a stroke and had not been able to speak until he saw the dog walk by and exclaimed ‘What a beautiful dog!’”

Boothby noted there is a lot of research going on but so much more to be done. There are studies comparing patients with open-heart surgery who went home to pets and those who didn’t. Those who did recuperated more quickly and actually lived longer. Other research studies how the connection with dogs lowers anxiety, blood pressure, and has other psychological and physiological effects.

Hartford Hospital is working on a partnership with Tails of Joy, a group of volunteers established in 1995 in Connecticut committed to providing caring and comfort through the use of therapy animals, to establish crisis teams for first responders. Boothby said, “Today 50 canine volunteers bring cheer, hope and healing to our patients, families, visitors, and staff.”
**Recent Developments**

The therapeutic potential of animals is increasingly gaining recognition and being studied and implemented in clinical settings and leading healthcare facilities to provide programs of pet therapy.

Margo A. Halm, RN, PhD wrote in the July 2008 issue of the “American Journal of Critical Care” on the human-animal connection and its healing power. Her findings were based on nine pediatric and adult studies and one mixed study (number of participants per study varied from 10-424) involving dog visits and evaluating vital signs, pain ratings, emotions, salivary cortisol levels, and perceived benefits.

Physiological results showed significant reduction in blood pressure, temperature, respiratory rate, and reduced pain. Psychological effects were a greater perception of happiness, relaxation, and calmness. Socially, children and parents noted the snuggling contact with the dogs was beneficial to healing. For adults, these visits bridged communication and connected them to the outside world. For all ages, the contact normalized the hospital environment and humanized the ICU environment.

Halm reported that nurses noted “the presence of animals made the work environment happier and more interesting with no negative impact on space or work flow…the unspoken healing bond between the patient and animal radiated back and absolutely affected other members of the healthcare community.”

A research study at Mount Sinai Beth Israel in New York on the effect certified therapy dogs have on cancer patients supported the suspicions of the investigators. In March 2014 CBS News’s Marlie Hall reported doctors found if patients spent time with the dogs during chemo and
radiation, there were marked improvement in the patients’ emotional well-being and overall quality of life.

A 30-year-old patient battling a rare cancer for several years said: “Psychologically it helps tremendously because it takes your mind off the chemo. It takes your mind off the pain…distracts me, especially when I’m feeling bad.”

Lorraine Ernst, RN, MS looked at these healing benefits in a 2014 article in the “Annals of Long Term Care.” She reported on the cardiovascular, psychological, and cognitive benefits of this human-canine contact.

A recurring benefit of animal-assisted therapy was improvement of psychological health. Ernst reported that surveys of psychiatrists and psychologists indicated nearly 50 percent of those surveyed have “prescribed” a pet for their patients. The human-animal interaction promotes positive emotions that increase confidence and reduce loneliness, sadness, anger, and insecurity. Her article cited numerous studies supporting significant benefits in all populations through the use of animal-assisted therapy including regular visits by volunteer therapy dog teams.

In her book The Power of Wagging Tails Dawn A. Marcus, MD, wrote from the point of view of being a doctor and a therapy dog handler. At the time she had two Soft-Coated Wheaten Terriers: Wheatie and Toby. There is much to support the material presented, from trustworthy medical research to first-person accounts.

Marcus’ research, which includes medical research and first-person accounts, noted the findings of a study at Massachusetts General Hospital (Coakley and Mahoney 2009) evaluating 59 patients before and after a 10-minute therapy dog visit.
3 percent lower breathing rate
22 percent drop in pain severity
19 percent boost in energy
53 percent drop in anxiety
48 percent decrease in depression
64 percent drop in feelings of anger
39 percent decrease in fatigue

Marcus further examined the multi-faceted and far-reaching benefits of dog therapy. She maintains the therapy-dog handler relationship benefits the dog, its handler, and those fortunate to experience therapy dog visits.

Becoming a therapy team takes time, training, and commitment. Since dogs are naturally social creatures, they will enjoy the bonds developed with their handler and interactions with those they visit. Teams often become part of a group that makes scheduled visits and provides support to each other thus creating personal relationships beyond the group.
CONCLUSION

The mounting literature and research along with the interviews, site visits, and photos clearly support the basic premise of this project: that therapy dogs are a powerful and positive force. The human-canine connection provides happiness and health benefits for all involved. Studies have shown that just being around, petting, or simply placing a hand on a dog can reduce blood pressure and heart rate, relieve stress, and provide a healing environment. The non-judgemental nature and unconditional love experienced with therapy dogs promotes a feeling of comfort, friendship, physiological and psychological health benefits to people of all ages.

Therapy dogs bring significant benefits to people in medical facilities, schools, assisted-living facilities, long-term skilled nursing homes, hospice living, among others. The benefits are far reaching, extending to the handlers, facility staff, and also the dogs.
**Reading List**


