

Pet Therapy and Dementia

The positive effects pets have on the well-being of people has been increasingly well documented in recent years. One proponent of this theory, Dr. William Thomas, maintained that people living in nursing homes often experience boredom, loneliness, and a feeling of helplessness. He proposed a change in design, which he called the "Eden Alternative." He advocated for the empowerment of staff and the inclusion of pets, plants, and children as part of the environment. Research has further supported the positive effect of the presence of animals (dogs, cats, birds, fish, miniature horses, and more), particularly on people with dementia. These benefits include:

- Improved mood with decreased feelings of depression, isolation, and loneliness.
- Lower blood pressure and heart rate with activities such as petting or brushing animals or simply watching fish swimming in an aquarium.
- A calming effect and reduction in anxiety and behavioral issues. The non-threatening, non-judgmental nature of animals is a source of unconditional love, resulting in a feeling of well-being. The science behind this is the chemical reaction generated in the brain lowering the level of the stress-producing hormone cortisol and increased production of the hormone serotonin.
- Improved socialization and mental stimulation resulting in improved social skills and self-esteem.
- Improved physical activity through increased joint movement and motor skills when doing such things as walking and playing with pets.
- Improved appetite and nutrition with an increase in physical activity and social interaction.
- An outlet for engagement with another living being on a deeper and often non-verbal level.
- A sense of purpose through caring for an animal.
- Bringing back fond memories of past pets and remembered times.

Pet therapy, or animal-assisted therapy, is a broad term to describe the guided interaction between a person and a trained animal. First developed in the early 1990s, this therapy builds on the innate bond between humans and animals. Today, a number of universities are offering graduate courses in animal and pet-assisted therapy. Animal-assisted therapy is performed with a well-trained, certified animal handler. Animals used for pet therapy must be up to date on their shots and trained to be well behaved around people.

Sources:

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