

## The Human-Animal Bond

In a world as chaotic, violent, tumultuous, and destructive as ours, with both man-made as well as natural disasters rampant, with minimal contact between humans and the natural world, our animal companions have assumed significance far beyond most people's comprehension. Our relationship with and appreciation and respect for domesticated animals such as dogs and cats have deepened, and many of us have come to regard our "pets" as beloved family members rather than chattel or beings simply to be used for our convenience or designed to assist us in our work.

We, as humans, have lost virtually all contact with the natural world and the healing, revitalizing, replenishing aspects of nature. Throughout the ages, we have always been a part of an agrarian society which deeply and, of necessity, appreciated the seasons and the power, beauty, bounty and perils of Mother Nature. Today, unfortunately, we underestimate and undervalue the significance of nature in our lives, much to our detriment. We simply have lost our understanding and awareness as to how vitally important – how integral- to our lives (physically, emotionally and spiritually) the world of nature is.

We have lost touch with the profound beauty and the many gifts which nature provides us. We grow increasingly ignorant of and nonchalant about the essential role that nature plays in our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual lives.. We have lost much of our spiritual essence and foundation as we diminish or even dismiss the importance of and relevance of nature and the natural world to our lives. Instead, we have embraced man-made accomplishments and technological achievements.

There has been an enormous amount of evidence based upon numerous scientific studies which substantiate the importance of nature and natural beauty in our lives. There are many reasons that we find peace, serenity and solace in our mountains, oceans, rivers and forests. There are many reasons that we derive pleasure, comfort and support from our animal companions.

There is significant scientific evidence, which supports the emotional and physiological benefits and the healing powers of our animal companions they lower our blood pressure, decrease our heart rate, and decrease anxiety, depression, sadness anger, fear and stress. Their presence has a calming and soothing effect upon us. Odendaal's study of 2000 measured significant changes in blood plasma levels of various neurochemicals after subjects engaged in a 30-minute positive interaction with an unfamiliar dog. Neurochemicals associated with a decrease in blood pressure increased; in humans and dogs, endorphin, oxytocin, prolactin, phenylectic acid, and dopamine increased

significantly. Cortisol, a hormone associated with increased stress levels, decreased significantly in humans.

A 2007 study by Cole, Gawlinski, Steers & Kotlerman found that visits with a therapy dog improved cardiopulmonary pressures, neurohormone levels, and anxiety in patients hospitalized with heart failure. Human heart failure patients had one 12 minute visit with a therapy dog – lower anxiety, epinephrine stress hormone dropped, blood pressure dropped.

In 2002 Wu, Niedra, Pendergast & McCrindle evaluated the effectiveness of a dog visitation program in helping 30 children and their families adjust to hospitalization on a pediatric cardiology ward. From their analysis of all the data, the researchers concluded that the dog visits relieved stress, normalized the hospital milieu, and improved patient and parent morale.

Richeson 2003 described how the nondirective presence of a therapy dog decreased agitation and increased positive social behaviors in older patients with dementia.

According to Dr Cynthia K. Chandler, a Professor of Counseling and Director of Animal Assisted Therapy at the University of North Texas, ‘Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) in counseling is the incorporation of pets as therapeutic agents into the counseling process. The therapy animal works in partnership with a human therapist to provide compassionate and stimulating therapy designed to facilitate human client recovery.’ AAT utilizes the special relationship between people and their pets to provide services for persons in need. AAT utilizes the human and animal bond to model and facilitate appropriate and nurturing relationships.’

The emotional, physical and spiritual benefits of animal companionship are incalculable. In the impersonal and highly technologically oriented world in which we live, animal companionship provides us with a link to the world of nature, beauty and the Source of all Creation.