

# [The healing power of animals](#)

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**Many animals from dogs and cats to horses and dolphins have played a role in the healing process.**

Sigmund Freud, considered by many to be the father of modern psychology, once wrote to a friend of the sympathy his dog Jofi showed him while he was undergoing cancer treatment. It would be of no surprise to Freud that today, animals are used in therapy.

Mr Charlie Ho, the co-founder of Therapy Dogs Singapore, says that 'dogs can do much more than us to help'.

Indeed, studies are now showing that to be true.

A study conducted in the United States at the University of California, Los Angeles, last year, showed visits by dogs to be more beneficial to patients with heart failure than visits by humans alone.

Patients who were visited by a dog and human showed a 17 per cent drop in epinephrine, a hormone produced by the body when stressed, after a 12-minute visit.

Those visited by a person alone showed only a 2 per cent drop in epinephrine levels after the 12 minutes.

Mr Ho has witnessed beneficial effects first-hand when visiting nursing homes, hospices and schools with volunteers and their dogs.

He tells the story of a lonely and depressed dementia patient who, having experienced business failure and family rejection, refused to talk to anybody.

But once they got the dog to do a few tricks the man started laughing.

Ms Kwok Yee Siang, an executive director at Bethany Methodist Nursing Home, adds that 'some residents who won't even talk to the person in the bed next to them will talk to the dogs'.

An unhappy woman at Peacehaven Nursing Home wept one day because she was moved to the common area to meet canine visitors.

But her 'tears turned to joy' when a friendly dog licked her face, says Ms Angeline Ng, leader of the Singapore Kennel Club pet therapy team for the Peacehaven Nursing Home.

Dogs aren't the only animals that can be helpful.

At Riding For The Disabled Association of Singapore (RDA), the elderly and disabled have a chance to ride horses in a safe and secure environment.

Ms Bee Wee, the head instructor, recounts how the first word a mother heard her disabled child speak was the name of the horse: Fraggie.

And while not all riders bond as effectively with their horses, the act of riding the horse imparts benefits.

‘For a kid who can’t write an essay, to control a 2,200kg animal is a huge boost of self-confidence,’ says Ms Kathleen Weidler, a former teacher who’s been volunteering with RDA since September. ‘It’s something even their parents can’t do,’ she adds.

The same effect can be seen in mentally disabled children working with dogs, says Madam Girija Nambier, a volunteer management executive for the Asian Women’s Welfare Association educational services.

Learning how to walk the dogs boosts the child’s self-confidence, she says.

Riding a horse can also be of great help to the physically disabled by improving their core strength, muscle tone, coordination and balance, says Ms Wee.

Mrs Jodi Bonnette, a 48-year-old teacher at the Singapore American School, certainly thinks so. She says her son Zachary, a 12-year-old with Angelman’s Syndrome, a rare neuro-genetic disorder, can walk much better after having done horseback riding for a few years.

‘His posture’s better, as well as his stamina,’ she says.

Although he does physiotherapy a few times a week, she thinks that the RDA ‘has been the best programme for him’.

Learning to ride a horse can also help concentration.

Ms Wee recalls how a hyperactive autistic boy, unable to stay in one place, was sitting still on a horse by the end of the fourth session.

And if nothing else, working with animals makes people happy.

As Mr Ralph Haering, a 29-year-old RDA volunteer, puts it: ‘The children come in nervous and they leave happy.’

# The Healing Power of Dogs

Dogs may play a larger role in health than realized. (Andrea Mohin/The New York Times)

Dogs have long had special standing in the medical world. Trained to see for the blind, hear for the deaf and move for the immobilized, dogs have become indispensable companions for people with disabilities.

But dogs appear to be far more than four-legged health care workers. Over the years, data on the larger role dogs play in health has trickled out from various corners of the world. One Japanese study found pet owners made 30 percent fewer visits to doctors. A Melbourne study of 6,000 people showed that owners of dogs and other pets had lower cholesterol, blood pressure and heart attack risk compared with people who didn't have pets. Obviously, the better health of pet owners could be explained by a variety of factors, but many experts believe companion animals improve health at least in part by lowering stress.

Dogs, in particular, also have been shown to do remarkable things to improve the health of their owners. There are stories of dogs warning their owners of imminent health threats. In 2003, University of Florida researchers published a report in the journal [Seizure](#) noting that some dogs seem to have an innate ability to detect impending seizures. A 2000 [report](#) in the British Medical Journal examined case studies of dogs alerting people with diabetes of a coming hypoglycemic episode.

More recently, some studies have suggested dogs can be cancer detectors. In 2006, the medical journal *Integrative Cancer Therapies* [reported](#) how ordinary house dogs could identify breast and lung cancer patients by smelling their breath. A University of Maine [study](#) is testing whether dogs can sniff out ovarian cancer.

The role dogs play in medicine is celebrated in a new book, "Paws & Effect: The Healing Power of Dogs" (Alyson Books, 2007), which chronicles the numerous ways dogs contribute to our health. Author Sharon Sakson is a journalist and television producer, dog breeder and American Kennel Club dog-show judge. She admits to being biased about her subject matter, and she tends to write about the mundane details of dogs and their owners. Much of the evidence surrounding dogs and health is anecdotal, although Ms. Sakson includes many references to published research. The stories of service dogs are particularly impressive, as is the nascent research into dogs' ability to detect cancer.

Ms. Sakson said she first began thinking about the link between dogs and health while reporting an earlier book on men and dogs. A few men she interviewed who had AIDS credited their dogs with playing a role in their improved health.

While Ms. Sakson says more studies are needed to show exactly what role dogs play in health, any dog owner already knows the benefits of their relationship with their pet.

"I went into it because I loved my dogs — they can do so much for our society," said Ms. Sakson. "There's no question they give us emotional support."

# Healing Power of Cats

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*Skyrun4*, a new entrant into the wide world of Orble has been a friend of mine for year's n years and I've invited her to share her thoughts with us. We've known each other since I last had hair that could honestly be combed; yup, that long. She loves paranormal stuff as do I, so hopefully, she'll hang out with us while contributing stories to amaze and delight us all.

While she and I were chatting, an interesting topic came up; *the healing power of cats*.

How is it that some of these seemingly distant, arrogant, aloof feline aliens can tune into their humans and know when they are sick or even dying? Who even knew that they cared about anything other than a clean litterbox, fresh water, copious amounts of food and full body massages when and where they want them.



But, our Siberian cat and mentor, Medford, knows when Tisha and I aren't feeling well. When that is the case, he'll take action to help by physically laying on our stomachs or chests and purring. It puts us in a calmer less stressful state and has us nodding out, getting rest the body needs. If it's just irritability, he'll hop up for pets and rubs, and soon everyone is less irritable. When I bang myself up working, usually my right hand and wrist, he will lay on it and purr until the pain is gone, then get up and go do his cat things. Odd eh?



Are cats conspiring to take over the world by lulling the human race to sleep and into a false sense of security with their purr therapy?

They are after all, very gifted psychics and manipulative as I've learned over the years.

He has the missus and I competing for his attention and affections; could this lead to other odd behaviors?

What are your cat stories?

Raven

## The Healing Power of Pets

By [Rebecca Armstrong](#), [The Independent UK](#). Posted [May 10, 2008](#).

As she makes her way through the hospital wards, Billie-Jean keeps up an impressive pace. She has to if she is going to see all the patients who are waiting for her. Wearing her official uniform, she looks neat and trim, and despite how busy she is, she always has time to stop if someone wants to say hello or slip her a Bonio. You see, Billie-Jean isn't a ward sister doing the rounds or a doctor bringing vital medicine, she's an Irish terrier. But despite the fact she's a canine, not human, carer, her medical value is second-to-none because she is a Pets As Therapy dog.

Pets As Therapy is a charity that takes pet dogs and cats to hospitals, hospices, residential care homes, day centres and special-needs schools. It was formed in 1983, explains chief executive Maureen Hennis, by a group of pet owners who were convinced that their animals could help other people. "At that time, people were moving into residential accommodation and nursing homes, and they had to give up their own pets," she says. "This wasn't only making them sad and depressed, sometimes it was actually making them ill."

The importance of regular contact with domestic animals has been highlighted by recent research conducted by the University of Minnesota. According to the study, having a cat around the house can cut the risk of having a heart attack or a stroke by almost half. After studying nearly 4,500 adults aged between 30 and 75 for 10 years, it was found that cat owners had a 40 per cent lower risk of suffering a fatal heart attack.

"For years we have known that psychological stress and anxiety are related to cardiovascular events, particularly heart attacks," says Dr Adnan Qureshi, executive director of the Minnesota Stroke Institute at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. According to Qureshi, the research shows that "essentially there is a benefit in relieving those inciting factors from pets". And in a study published last year, Dr Deborah Wells of Queen's University Belfast found that dog owners tend to suffer less from ill health, have lower cholesterol, and lower blood pressure. "It is possible that dogs can directly promote our well-being by buffering us from stress," says Dr Wells.

Today, Billie-Jean, along with her owner, Emma Charlton, is on her weekly visit to the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in Putney, south London. The hospital is just one of the thousands of places that PAT animals visit every year. "When we first started, we used to have to look around for establishments for registered PAT dogs to visit. Now we have more than 900 establishments waiting for PAT dogs to visit in," says Hennis. "Currently, we have 3,600 dogs and 92 cats working in the community and they are benefiting more than 100,000 patients every single week in the UK." As Billie-Jean makes her way through the hospital, clad in a bright PAT vest and fresh from the grooming parlour, it's clear that she is a real favourite with the patients.

When Billie-Jean bumps into Scott Robertson in one of the hospital's corridors, his face is wreathed in smiles at the sight of her. Charlton slips him a dog biscuit, which he hands to Billie-Jean as she enthusiastically licks his hands.

Not all of the patients here can articulate their likes and dislikes as clearly, so Charlton always checks with the ward staff who will welcome some time with Billie-Jean. Tina Loughney, Charlton

tells me, loves to see her. Loughney usually communicates through facial movements and her expressive hands but today she has a surprise for everyone. Loughney has dogs at home and Emma asks how they are. "All right," she says. Charlton is gobsmacked -- and thrilled. "That's the first time I've heard Tina speak." The staff agree. "It's moments like this that make it worthwhile," says Charlton, who has been visiting the hospital with Billie-Jean for the past two years.

For over an hour, Billie-Jean pads through the hospital, shaking paws with and licking anyone who says hello. She is wonderfully behaved -- she seems to know instinctively when to be gentle and when she can be a little more boisterous. This is no accident -- every PAT animal is assessed to ensure that only the best-behaved pets come into contact with patients. Billie-Jean and her ilk are a hard-working part of the healthcare system. "PAT animals are being used for desensitisation in phobia patients, as part of stroke rehabilitation, helping to get people to use their limbs again and to talk," says Hennis. "Very often people go into a world of their own and they stop communicating with anyone. But if you go in with a dog, it's amazing how a dog can get through barriers that humans can't."

When speaking to a doctor friend about PAT, he waxes lyrical about his experiences of the animals and tells me about a patient on a stroke ward who had not spoken since she arrived in hospital. During an encounter with one of the charity's volunteer canines, she stroked the dog and uttered her first word -- "soft".

Hennis, herself a regular visitor to a number of establishments, tells me about how she realised the importance of what the charity was doing. "There was a lady that I visited who used to sit by the door every Saturday morning, and when she saw my dog she always used to say, 'Here's my ray of sunshine, she's my reason for staying alive'." One thing's for sure -- it's hard to imagine the average GP getting such a warm welcome.

### **Animal magic: how pets prevent illness**

Dog owners tend to have lower cholesterol and lower blood pressure, as dogs can reduce the risk of spikes in blood pressure due to stress or tension.

In some cases, the emotional support offered by an animal is greater than that offered by a human. For older people in particular, an animal can fulfil "the need to be needed".

Owning a pet can improve a person's chances of survival after a life-threatening illness, by helping to lower blood pressure. Pets can also help speed up rehabilitation following a stroke.

Children with pets have higher levels of self-esteem and function better emotionally than those without, studies have shown. Some teachers have introduced pets into the classroom and children with learning disabilities and behavioural disorders such as autism, for example, show immediate benefits from animal-assisted therapy.

Children who live with a cat or dog in their first years have a lower incidence of hay fever and asthma and are less likely to develop animal-related allergies, or to suffer a bout of gastroenteritis.

By George Bull