

The therapeutic benefits of the human-animal bond

CHICAGO—November 30, 2009—A pet owner knows the enormous joy and comfort that an animal can provide, especially in troubled times. Most pets are considered important members of the family and irreplaceable companions. A growing body of research now documents the value of the human-animal bond in child development, elderly care, mental illness, physical impairment, dementia, abuse and trauma recovery, and the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth and adults.

In two articles in a recent issue of *Family Process*, titled "Human-Animal Bonds I," (focused on the benefits of companion animals) and "Human-Animal Bonds II," (focused on their role in couple and family dynamics and family therapy), Dr. Froma Walsh reviews and distills the essence of this cutting-edge research. She examines how a bond with a pet can strengthen human resilience through times of crisis, persistent adversity, and disruptive transitions, such as relocation, divorce, widowhood, and adoption. The well-being and healing that a pet can provide include a range of relational benefits, from stress reduction and playfulness, to loyal companionship, affection, comfort, security, and unconditional love. Pets also can be drawn into couple and family conflict. Women often do not leave abusive partners because of threats of abuse to a beloved pet.

Dr. Walsh says, "The powerful meaning and significance of companion animals is underestimated." Mental health professionals rarely consider these bonds in clinical assessment and intervention, with focus limited to human relationships. Profound attachments with pets—and grief in their loss—are often marginalized, seen as abnormal, or altogether ignored in theory, training, and practice. These two articles provide an essential overview to inform clinical scholars and practitioners of the potential benefits in facilitating positive growth for individuals, couples, and families when companion animals are included as members of the healing team—and even co-therapists.

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This study is published in the October 2009 issue of the *Family Process*. Media wishing to receive a PDF of this article may contact scholarlynews@wiley.com.

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<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/123189842/abstract>.

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About the Journal: *Family Process* is an international, multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal committed to publishing original articles, including theory and practice, philosophical underpinnings, qualitative and quantitative clinical research, and training in couple and family therapy, family interaction, and family relationships with networks and larger systems.

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