

An Explanation of the Importance of Companion Animals

Summary: “Human-Animal Bonds: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals,” an article by Dr. Froma Walsh, Professor Emerita and Co-Director of the Center for Family Health at the University of Chicago. This extremely well-researched article was published in *Family Process*, a respected, peer-reviewed academic journal.
[*Page numbers refer to the original article.]

Walsh begins by tracing the ancient and historical bonds between societies and animals from the classical world forward, which has ultimately led to the phenomenon of companion animals that we recognize today.

- She notes the widespread acceptance of the term “companion animal, to connote a psychological bond and a mutual relationship” between humans and animals (465).
- She cites a wealth of recent studies that correlate companionability between people and animals to positive psychological outcomes: “Interactions with companion animals increase neurochemicals associated with relaxation and bonding and they improve human immune system functioning” (466).
- Perhaps more importantly, she notes that studies indicate “interactions with pets alter the tendency of those with mental problems to focus negatively on themselves. They become more involved in their environment in nonthreatening ways with a companionate animal” (466).
- She also cites a number of studies that “have found that animal-human interactions reduce anxiety, depression, and loneliness as they enhance social support and general well-being” (467).

Dr. Walsh argues that the mental health field has not paid enough attention to the benefits derived from the meaningful relationships people have with their pets.

- She cites studies that indicate people who are able to “connect strongly with animals also have a large capacity for love, empathy, and compassion” (468).
- Other studies indicate that, despite what has often been assumed about people who bond closely with animals, the relationship does not automatically serve as a substitute for “failed interactions with humans” (468).
- However, studies also indicate that people who have been marginalized or who “experience social stigma or outright rejection, such as gay and lesbian persons, find enormous comfort in the unconditional acceptance and love of animals” (468).

Dr. Walsh argues for a “deeper understanding of companionate bonds” between people and animals and a higher regard for the therapeutic value of maintaining those bonds (469).

- She states that “in uncertain times...pets offer a comforting respite from life’s storms” (470).
- She relates studies which trace how pets “foster positive psychosocial development of children who show enhanced empathy, self-esteem, cognitive development and greater participation in social and athletic activities” (470).
- Indeed, for some people their animals offer the only “uncomplicated” and purely positive relationship in their lives (471).

This article explains that people who have suffered abuse, neglect or trauma are especially helped by forming a bond with a companion animal.

- Walsh cites clinical studies that suggest “pets may provide a protective effect for alienated or despondent individuals who find meaning in their lives through their bonds with pets” (472-3).
- In some clinical studies, even people who expressed a desire to commit suicide explained that they would not do so only because they could not bring themselves to abandon their pets in that way.

Walsh also discusses the new practice of “Animal-Assisted Interventions” and the positive results that have been generated through this procedure.

- In various kinds of group settings clients were “more alert, responsive and ...happier” when animals were present (474).
- “Animals are incorporated into a variety of programs as a significant part of the treatment and recovery for people with physical, cognitive, emotional, or social challenges, such as wounded military veterans and children with autism” (474).
- Progress is being made in the treatment of developmental disorders and ADD through the use of animal therapy which brings about “a range of prosocial behaviors – nurturing and affection, play, lower aggression, peer cooperation, responsibility, teaching others, and responding to adult authority” (476).
- “Those who have experienced abuse or neglect in their human relationships connect empathetically with rescued animals, their suffering, their good heart and their potential” (475).

Walsh’s Conclusions:

- “More than simply recreation or stress reduction, animal-assisted programs demonstrate clear therapeutic and rehabilitation benefits” (475).
- “Companion animals ... can meet many core psychosocial needs and enrich our lives. They provide pleasure and relaxation; deep affection and steadfast loyalty; and security and constancy in our changing lives. These attachments bring joy and comfort to children and adults and contribute to healthier, happier and even longer lives. Bonds with companion animals may not be our whole lives, but they can make our lives whole” (476).