



American Brain Tumor Association

## Animal-Assisted Therapy

Who ever thought a four-legged bundle of soft fur or a smiling dolphin could be part of a treatment plan? The snuggle, touch and kisses of an animal can help to improve the well being of a patient by providing hope, love and affection.

The nature and complexity of the human-animal bond is significant to understanding the role it plays in recovery from illness, loss or trauma. Pet therapy, also known as Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), is a technique that utilizes animals to help patients battle



disease or stress. Originating in Belgium during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, pet therapy is defined as a clinical method aimed at promoting the natural and healing bonds that exist between humans and animals, both for preventive and therapeutic reasons. The rationale behind this

practice is that animals naturally stimulate an attraction and involvement response in humans, which is then reflected in the person's well being. Companion animals can be used in different ways, such as providing assistance in coping with cancer or helping with physical therapy. AAT may be a beneficial intervention to alleviate distress in a patient, their family and caregivers. In 1859, Florence Nightingale wrote that a small pet "is often

an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially.” By providing comfort to patients, pets have been proven to lower blood pressure and cause the release of endorphins. Endorphins are chemicals that are released in the body that limit pain by creating a euphoric sensation.

There are many different methods of using animals for therapeutic assistance. Dogs are the most common pets participating in these programs, however, cats, horses and even fish can be just as effective. (Watching a curious goldfish swimming in a tank can be very calming!)

Not only can a pet cause the suppression of physical pain, but they can also provide hope and nonjudgmental love.

According to a study published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences* (July, 2002), just spending a small amount of



time with a dog each week reduces the feelings of loneliness in long-term care residents. Animals bring smiles to faces and are comforting to hold. Caring for pets is a responsibility that can be helpful to patients since they are distracted from their worries for a short time. Caring for an animal provides the feeling of being needed and allows patients to experience the joy of the moment.

Some nursing homes and hospitals allow patients to be visited by a pet – if you are interested in such a visit, ask the nurse manager on the unit or one of the hospital administrators. Several volunteer organizations offer animal therapy visits to those who

do not have their own pet. The Humane Society ([www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)) or the Delta Society ([www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)) provides animal therapy services and animal-assisted therapy awareness programs. Many hospitals offer animal-assisted therapy programs for their patients. Edward Hospital in Naperville, Illinois is one of the nation's leading AAT hospitals. Over the past three years, 36,000 patients have received animal-assisted visits at this facility. To learn more about this program, visit [www.edward.org](http://www.edward.org)

Pet therapy is an uplifting way to help patients physically, emotionally and socially. If you have a pet therapy experience that you would like to share at the ABTA web site, please e-mail [gerijo@abta.org](mailto:gerijo@abta.org) or [socialwork@abta.org](mailto:socialwork@abta.org)

#### References:

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