

# OFF THE BEAT

## Take two Milkbone and call me in the morning

A few eyebrows were raised recently at the World Congress of Psychiatry in Honolulu when it was reported that dogs make excellent psychotherapists. In fact, Ohio State University researchers concluded that in reaching and helping chronic psychiatric patients, canines succeeded in many cases where human therapists had failed.

While this may seem curious to the public at large and even to many psychiatrists, it comes as absolutely no surprise to People who Understand Pets, or PUPS, as most of us prefer to be called. Although all PUPS love their dogs, we bristle at the label "dog-lover." True pet understanders develop relationships with their dogs that progress far beyond the syrupy, puppy-love stage of coddling and baby talk. We have come to understand and accept our pets' shortcomings, as well as their attributes—much as they have ours.

And that perhaps is what places dog-person friendships at a considerably healthier level than many interpersonal relationships. In the Ohio State study, all 47 of the patients who accepted dogs (three patients refused to participate) showed some subsequent improvement. And in the 11 cases studied in depth, "all 11 exhibited a marked and sustained improvement," report Samuel A. Corson and Elizabeth O'Leary Corson of OSU's psychiatry department. The results, they emphasize, came with patients "who had failed to respond to traditional forms of therapy."

Take the case of Sonny, a 19-year-old diagnosed as a psychotic, who spent most of his time lying in bed in a mummy position. Neither psychotherapy nor powerful antipsychotic drugs could draw him out of his shell. But prior to resorting to electroshock therapy, the researchers decided to introduce Sonny to Arwyn, a wirehair fox terrier. Dogs do not pay attention to alleged psychosis or to other psychiatric diagnoses, so Arwyn proceeded to jump on Sonny and happily lick his face and ears. "To everyone's amazement," report the researchers, "Sonny tumbled the dog about joyously, [asked] 'Where can I keep him?' ... and followed the dog when she jumped to the floor." Sonny soon opened up to the therapists and other patients and later recovered and was discharged.

Though this may be viewed as an extreme case, there is no telling how often dogs save their owners from serious psychiatric problems before the fact. Most PUPS will testify to their dogs' uncanny ability to sense a bad day at work, problems with a loved one or simply depression for no specific reason. The comfort—and, yes, therapy—of a pet who



Woody, a specialist in occupational stress, comforts the writer.

will be depressed right along with you, no questions asked, or try to cheer you up with a paw on your lap or a sniff at the earlobe is unmatched in most instances by any \$60, 45-minute session.

Pet understanders continue to tolerate discrimination, even illogical practices such as banning dogs from campgrounds in huge state parks, where they are likely to do far less damage than many of the human adults and their offspring have been known to cause. But apart from cases where someone has had a traumatic experience with a vicious animal, it is hard for PUPS to comprehend people who show contempt for all dogs. True, some pets will egest at inopportune times and places, but most are far better behaved in that and other respects than many human infants (as countless train and plane travelers and movie-goers will attest).

And dogs do bark—to express love, fear, dislike and to protect. At first, the Ohio State researchers feared that barking might hinder the positive effects of pet therapy. "Since our animals were not debarked, the patients could at times hear the dogs bark, a situation that led to occasional complaints from some staff members," they reported. "The barking, however, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Some of the patients, especially the adolescents ... broke their self-imposed silence and began to inquire whether they could play with the dogs or help take care of them."

The psychiatrists conclude that the pets "exerted significant favorable effects on the 'esprit de corps' of the ward. It led to extensive positive social interactions, not only on the part of the patient being treated, but also on the part of the other patients. ... The pet seemed to add a great deal to the development of

a humanizing atmosphere on the ward."

The researchers admit that, as is true with any new therapy, it is hard to pin down exactly why the improvements occurred. But a sportswriter for Knight-Ridder Newspapers named Bill Lyon could tell them. Several years ago, Lyon's dog died after living with the family for six and a half years. Lyon wrote about it:

"Dogs never ask why. They know. They know when you want sympathy, they know when you want joy. Dogs never say 'I'm too busy right now' or 'give me a call next week' or 'I'll get back to you later.' ... Maybe that's what dogs are for—to remind us of all the things we tend to forget about getting along with each other."

—Joel Greenberg

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