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The healing power of dogs: Cocoa's story.

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Abstract

Animals bring a sense of "at homeness" and even normalcy to people who are hospitalized or live in health care facilities. Illnesses, separation from family, fear, loneliness, and even depression may be lessened for those who receive a therapy dog visit by providing a welcome change in routine and something to look forward to. Individuals are often more active and responsive during and after a visit. Just stroking and petting a dog requires the use of hands and arms, as well as the motions of stretching and turning. Dogs are also unconcerned with age or physical ability; they accept people as they are. This alone causes many to reach out and interact with dogs. Animals provide a focus for conversation and a common interest. As Cocoa's human partner can attest, a pet also makes it easier for strangers to talk. Cocoa is known by so many people at the facilities she visits that residents' family members often stop to talk with "Cocoa's mom" when they meet her in the community, asking questions about how Cocoa is doing. When Cocoa is no longer able to perform her services, many in her community will mourn. Cocoa's story, as well as the limited research literature, supports the positive physical and psychological effects of animals, but continued research on the effect of therapy animals on health outcomes is needed. As advocates for clients, nurses are in key positions to facilitate the inclusion of animals in clients' care. Although not for everyone, including those who react negatively to animals or who are allergic, **pet therapy** offers important possibilities for providing holistic care that extends not only to clients, but also to family members and staff, and to the pets themselves.

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MeSH Terms

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