



## Therapeutic Benefits of Dogs

At The Behavioral Wellness Group, we complete thorough initial assessments on new patients which ultimately result in recommendations for appropriate levels of care. This may mean outside referrals for Inpatient Hospitalization or Partial Hospitalization. BWG itself offers Intensive Outpatient Therapy, Medication Management and Outpatient Individual Therapy. Outpatient therapy at BWG may entail such things as support, unconditional positive regard, meaningful professional relationships and coping skills to deal with life. It has become increasingly apparent that many of the coping skills we teach parallel the benefits obtained from *interacting with pets*. This article will focus on several parallels between life coping skills and therapeutic benefits of having a dog in one's life.

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness requires learning to keep one's mind focused in the moment, in the here and now. This helps prevent dwelling on negative things from the past which increases depression or dwelling on future issues which increases worry, tension and anxiety.

*Dogs are naturally very mindful of the present moment and also encourage us to focus on them and our momentary surroundings. They teach us how to live with joy and passion in the here and now.*

### **Distraction**

Distraction involves using the mind to distract oneself from current physical or emotional distress. It allows us to "change channels" and to interrupt worries and negativity from reaching the conscious parts of the thinking brain.

*Dogs are a great distraction from daily life stressors and help us to "push away" from negativity by engaging in alternative thoughts and behaviors.*

### **Gratitude**

Gratitude is a very important part of sound psychological health. This not only involves things that one would automatically think of such as food, clothing, shelter and family. It also includes "little" things that we often take for granted: moisture in the eyes, saliva in the mouth, 4 functional limbs, morning urinary and bowel functions to name a few.

*Dogs are great teachers of gratitude. They are happy to see you come home. Excited to get the same treat or dog food over and over. Grateful for a bowl of water. Pleased to have you pet them. Ecstatic to play with the same toy over and over again.*

### **Nonjudgmental**

We teach our patients to take themselves, their egos out of situations. This entails observing things more from a distance and not absorbing them into one's body. Patients are encouraged not to judge other people, places, things or situations.

*Dogs model nonjudgmental attitudes. They accept you unconditionally in spite of your attitude, your mood, no matter how your day has gone and regardless of your actions in the moment.*

### **Exercise**

Therapists often reinforce the importance of exercise for sound physical and emotional health. I often tell my patients, "just move your body".

*Dogs show us how to move. Have you ever noticed that after a period of time of relaxation or lethargy, a dog will show a burst of energy by running around or chasing its tail? My dog will challenge me to a daily chase around the house or yard. Dogs motivate us to move, increase our metabolism and get our endorphins (natural antidepressants) and enkephalins (natural pain killers) flowing.*

### **Humor**

Therapy often reinforces the need for laughter and humor in one's life. Even smiling can become hard-wired in our brains over time. As with exercise above, laughter increases one's metabolism and gets endorphins (natural antidepressants) and enkephalins (natural pain killers) flowing.

*If you watch a dog long enough, you invariably will be smiling or laughing. Their unique and playful ways are enough to make one smile at minimum and laugh at best. Because humans as social beings rarely laugh alone, dogs evoke laughter in us.*

### **Emotion Regulation**

We as therapists teach that it is imperative that one learn to keep their emotional responses to external stressors in proportion to the situation. Individuals learn to stop and think, asking themselves where a given situation would fall on a scale of 1-100 out of all of the things that could happen in a lifetime. This requires responding with thought versus reacting emotionally. Regulating one's emotions decreases the intensity of emotional and thus physical distress experienced.

*Dogs have natural ability to help us regulate our emotions. Caring for our dog helps give us a sense of purpose. Petting a dog provides sensory relief and has been known to lower cortisol, stress and blood pressure levels, not only leading to improved physical health but also emotional well-being. Recent research reinforces that dogs recognize human emotions and sooth us when we are feeling down.*

## **Stress Management**

Stress management involves many of the techniques mentioned in this article among others to manage chronic stressors in a way that improves quality of life. In today's hectic and fast paced world, time and techniques to slow down and calm ourselves are very important. Distress is a part of life, and mental health professionals teach how to tolerate and manage stress.

*Dogs definitively help humans reduce stress levels and they teach us how to cuddle. As mentioned above, human interactions with dogs decrease stress levels by lowering the production of the stress hormone cortisol and increasing the stress reducing hormone oxytocin for increased feelings of calm. Oxytocin has also been known as the "cuddle hormone" or the "love hormone" because it is naturally released when humans snuggle, bond or cuddle, even with their dogs. In addition, dogs provide a means of tolerating distressing situations which otherwise feel hopeless and futile.*

## **Meaning and Purpose**

In order to have balance in life along with a healthy lifestyle, humans need a sense of purpose and meaning. Therapy encourages one to focus on what they contribute to society, what they "give back" to this world. This is very important for our sense of well-being and the meaning, purpose of our lives.

*Dogs give humans a daily sense of purpose. At times, it may give a person a reason to wake up in the morning, get out of bed and feed their dog or take them out to potty. Caring for a dog adds meaning to many who otherwise struggle with the existential crisis of why they are here.*

## **Connection**

Humans are social beings. Therapists emphasize the importance of human interaction and social connection, which are very important for sound emotional health. In order to have a balanced life, humans need quiet time alone but they also need to bond with others. Many in our society struggle with loneliness, which is very painful and significantly adds to depressed feelings.

*Dogs provide many with companionship, connection and company. Dogs have been shown in research studies to significantly lower levels of loneliness felt by humans who otherwise feel despair and depression. Walking a dog also often leads to increased human interactions with others who want to pet your furry friend or discuss him with you. Many friendships have been born this way.*

## **Encouragement**

Being one's best cheerleader goes a long way in taking charge of one's life and being healthy emotionally. Although things are often distressing, learning coping skills to manage one's life goes a long way in believing in oneself and the fact that anything that comes along can be dealt with by using a multitude of coping skills and tools.

*Dogs encourage in many ways. Their presence may encourage someone to continue to live and not give up. Dogs have been known to help those struggling with any type of past or current trauma to keep moving forward, tolerate the distress and look forward to hope in the future.*

## **Letting-Go**

Mental health professionals teach their patients to not only be mindful of the moment but to let-go of control, turn things over to whatever or whomever they decide is their higher power. They are taught to release things and not hold them in their body which can lead to what I term “the pressure cooker effect”. They are taught deep breathing among other methods of releasing pent-up emotion and distress.

*Dogs teach us to let-go and not internalize things. They forget negative interactions quite readily and are ready for meaningful interactions in the here and now. They teach us to forfeit the past and to love, play, eat, enjoy with great abandon.*

## **Meditation**

Patients are taught meditation by many therapists. Meditation involves silently calming oneself and focusing the mind either for relaxation or spiritual reasons. It has been known to stop racing thoughts, reprogram the brain, and decrease distracted thinking. It has been known to help manage chronic pain, improve mood and to reduce baseline levels of stress and anxiety.

*Dogs teach us to silently calm ourselves and remain focused. Your furry companion will often come and sit next to you calmly, quietly and peacefully without being forced or bribed in any way. Dogs have even been trained to do meditation with their owners, which have had mutual benefits. Both owners and dogs have been shown to be more relaxed following joint meditation exercises.*

## **Deep Breathing**

Patients are often taught breathing techniques deep from within the diaphragm. Deep and slow breathing is associated with decreased physical and emotional anxiety as well as increased distress tolerance. Deep breathing helps one relax, reduces muscle tension and thus also pain.

*Dogs instinctively show us how to take deep breaths for the relaxation response. Watch a dog take deep breaths on occasion or give one last deep sigh as they lay down or prepare themselves for sleep. They instinctively engage in deep breathing and letting-go techniques and teach us how to do it.*

In conclusion, many techniques taught by mental health professionals to increase quality of life are instinctively taught and modeled by our furry friends if we watch them carefully and learn from them. This article includes just a few of them. Now you complete this article. What other life lessons does your dog teach you?

**John A. Glovan, Psy.D.**  
Director, Health and Wellness Program  
Co-Founder, The Behavioral Wellness Group  
8224 Mentor Ave #208 Mentor OH 44060  
P: 440 392 2222 #302 F: 440 565 2349

[iglovan@behavioralwellnessgroup.com](mailto:iglovan@behavioralwellnessgroup.com)  
[www.behavioralwellnessgroup.com](http://www.behavioralwellnessgroup.com)