



Shelter

research

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Building on your strengths within the shelter environment

by Vanessa Rohlif

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Promoting happiness in the workplace

People spend on average a third of their lives at work so it is extremely important to cultivate happiness in the workplace. Working in an animal shelter is no different – especially when you often have to deal with unhappy situations. Research also indicates that there may be a flow on effect. Satisfaction with work is associated with life satisfaction as well as reduced levels of conflict in the home (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Work satisfaction is also beneficial for the organization because it is associated with friendlier service, low staff turnover, higher productivity, and reduced sick leave (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Encouraging happiness is something that is of particular interest to researchers and practitioners of Positive Psychology.

What is positive psychology?

Positive psychology is a new and rapidly growing field of Psychology. Unlike traditional models of Psychology, Positive Psychology is concerned with the study of optimal human functioning rather than pathology. Basically positive psychologists are concerned with understanding and promoting happiness.

Understanding and Promoting Happiness

According to the founder of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, there are three ways to be happy; Pleasure, Engagement and Meaning (Seligman, 2002).

Pleasure – is all about increasing positive emotions. Positive emotions can be increased by focusing on the past, present or future. We can experience positive emotions about the past by practicing gratitude. Positive emotions about the present can be experienced by savouring (e.g. savouring the taste of a chocolate bar). Positive emotions about the future can be experienced through the practice of hope and optimism. These forms of

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A Research History of Pets and Human Health

Animal welfare is about more than saving the lives of animals, it's about enriching the lives of people.



We know instinctively just how much of a positive role pets play in our daily lives. Science demonstrates it too. New studies are regularly revealing the positive impact that pets have on our daily lives. Pets nourish our social life, improve our personal health and boost our general well being. And that's just the start.

For 12,000 years, the human race has been accompanied and supported by an animal population. So in today's society, where technology dominates more than ever before, it's not surprising that our interest in keeping animals as pets has increased.

Over the past 50 years scientists and researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between humans and animals which falls under the title Human/Animal Interactions (HAI) or anthrozoology.

Key Areas of Anthrozoological Research

Pets in the Community

The Effect of Pets on Physiological & Cardiovascular Health

Pets and General Health

Pets and Psychological Health

Pets and Children's Social Development

Pets and the Immune System

Pets and the Elderly

Pets in the community

When healthy interactions occur frequently within communities, we think of them as being well connected. Strong connections like these build something called ‘social capital’ or ‘the glue that binds our communities together’.

Strong social capital creates positive health and economic viability within society. With growing concern that social capital is eroding and giving way to feelings of loneliness, research is being undertaken to look at the way that pets can act as relationship builders and social motivator.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES	
1.	In 1983, Peter Messent researched people walking with and without a dog in an urban park. The study revealed that the presence of a dog dramatically increased the number and length of conversations people had with each other. It also showed that pets provide a focus for conversation and a means of “breaking the ice” - especially important for some elderly people, or those with obvious disabilities, such as people in wheelchairs.
2.	In 2005, Western Australian researchers Wood et al conducted a random telephone survey of 339 residents. The study found that pet ownership was positively associated with social contact and interaction and with perceptions of neighbourhood friendliness

Given that 63% of Australian households own a pet of some kind, it’s worth considering the role that pets could play in creating a stronger sense of community.



Pets and Physiological and Cardiovascular Health

The impact of animal companions on cardiovascular health was first recognised in the early 1980s. Understandably, it has generated a lot of interest in medical circles.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES	
1.	In 2001, Allen et al reported that pet ownership reduced blood pressure response to mental stress. They discovered that responses to mental stress amongst pet owners were significantly lower than those patients who were only receiving blood pressure medication.
2.	In 1992, Anderson et al studied 5,741 participants attending a free screening clinic at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne. The research found that pet owners had lower levels of risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Such factors included lower systolic blood pressure, lower plasma triglycerides and in men, lower cholesterol
3.	In 1980, American psychiatrist Aaron Katcher examined the effect of social support on the survival of people one year after suffering a heart attack. He found to his surprise that pets made a significant difference contributing an additional 4% to the patient’s chance of survival.

Given that physical inactivity and obesity are second only to tobacco as the leading cause of death in Australia, investigating the role that pets play in reducing such health risks is an imperative.

Pets and General Health

RESEARCH EXAMPLES	
1.	In 2008, Cutt et al, found that dog acquisition led to an increase in walking and the maintenance of owner walking behaviour .
2.	In 2008, researchers Timperio et al found that 5 – 6 year old children whose family owned a dog had lower odds of being overweight or obese; suggesting that dog ownership may prevent obesity among young children

Research suggests that pet ownership creates significant health rewards which facilitate health cost savings and has far reaching economic benefits.

A Research History of Pets and Human Health

cont.



Longitudinal Studies on Pets and General Health

Longitudinal research examines the health of an individual before and after pet acquisition. For example, it may question whether people who choose to own a pet are healthier to begin with (correlational) as opposed to health benefits arising solely as a result of pet ownership (causal). However, the longitudinal research appears to support the notion that pet ownership benefits our general health.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES

1. In 1991, James Serpell conducted a longitudinal intervention study, recruiting three groups of people. The first group was given dogs, the second cats, and the third neither. Before the intervention, all three groups had similar results for a self reported assessment of general health. One month later, the reports of minor illnesses and complaints had substantially reduced in the case of the dog group (but not the cat), this remained true for the ten month duration of the study. The difference between the dog and cat effect may be because dog owners exercise more.
2. In 1995, Olbrich studied 225 nursing home occupants. Half of the occupants were given budgerigars. The conclusion six weeks later was that budgies increased the physical, social and psychological quality of life in old age."
3. In 2004, Headey et al studied Australian, German and Chinese pet owners. They found that the health benefits of pet ownership for the general community exists in the populations of all three countries, particularly for long term pet owners. The data indicated that pet owners make fewer annual doctor visits than non-owners. In 2007, the researchers went on to provide strong evidence from German and Australian studies that showed that the relationship between pet ownership and improved health is probably causal, not just correlational

Pets and Psychological Health

Studies that examine better psychological health associated with pet ownership frequently discuss issues such as depression, anxiety, loneliness and emotional distress and feelings of well being.

Terms such Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) or Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) are now used to describe the increasing use of companion animals in clinical, therapeutic and remedial environments.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES

1. In the 1960's, psychiatrist Boris Levinson had trouble with a particularly withdrawn boy. During a session, Levinson happened to bring his dog with him. For the first time, Levinson witnessed a response in the child who began to interact with the dog. He continued to bring his dog to the sessions and before long, the boy began to interact directly with him. From there, Levinson used the technique regularly to establish a "bridging" relationship with most of his young patients.
2. In 2007, Souter et al, conducted a review of the data from five previous studies on the effectiveness of dog assisted AAT for treating depression. Her review concluded that the effects were statistically meaningful and large enough to be of practical significance.
3. 1993, Cheryl Straede and Richard Gates conducted a study on the impact that cat ownership had on mental health. They found that cat owners had significantly better scores for psychological health, indicating a lower level of psychiatric disturbance. This could be considered to imply better psychological health than non-pet owner subjects."



Pets and Children's Social Development

The urge to nurture is a basic human instinct - one which has evolved to make sure we look after our children and fellow tribe members for indefinite periods. Children, too, have an urge to nurture and given that many no longer care for large groups of siblings, pets offer the opportunity to develop nurturing skills.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES

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| 1. | In 1985, Reinhold Bergler found that in a study of German teenagers, feelings of loneliness, restlessness, boredom, despair, depression and futility were less apparent in dog owners than in non dog owners. Teenagers that owned dogs were also more inclined to find life more fun, and generally have a more positive outlook on life |
| 2. | In 2004, Salmon et al conducted a large Australian study of the physical activity and sedentary behaviours of children. It was found that young children in families with pets – particularly dogs – took more family walks than those without pets. Older children in families with pets, rated outdoor play with pets second only to play with friends. And young teenage girls reported feeling safer when walking alone with their family dog. |
| 3. | In 1983, Guttman et al's study of school children showed that pet owners were not only more popular with classmates, but appeared more empathetic as well. |

Pets are an integral part of Australian childhood. The most likely group of pet owners will be families with children. More than just a simple playmate or confidante, pets aid childhood development, particularly in the development of nurturing and social skills. Self esteem has been shown by several researchers to be higher in children or adolescents who have a pet.

Pets and the Immune System

Western cultures report increasing rates of asthma and allergic disease with pets often implicated as a causal factor. An interesting research development in recent years however, has demonstrated that the opposite may in fact be the case. The presence of cats and dogs in the home from an early age may actually 'acclimatise' the developing immune system to be less sensitive to allergens in later life.

RESEARCH EXAMPLES

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| 1. | In 2003, Gern et al found that having a dog in infancy was associated with reduced allergic sensitisation and atopic dermatitis. |
| 2. | In 2004, English researcher McNicholas found that children from pet owning families had less school absenteeism due to illness and were more likely to have normal levels of immune functions than those from non-pet owning families. |

Research reveals that pets in the home creates a regulatory or stabilizing influence on the immune functioning of children, leading in turn to a decrease in health problems and an increase in positive long term health behaviours.



A Research History of Pets and Human Health

cont.



Pets and the Elderly

The role of pets in the lives of the aged is particularly significant for those living in a nursing home or in some form of assisted care. Numerous studies show that pets provide one of the few interventions capable of permanently lifting the atmosphere of hospices and nursing homes. For the rest of the elderly population still living in their own home, pet ownership has many benefits.



RESEARCH EXAMPLES

1. In 2003, Richeson et al conducted an intervention study using Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) to measure the effects on the subjective wellbeing of 37 nursing home residents. The residents, with no recorded cognitive impairments (mean age 82.5 years) were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 groups: control, AAT, or student visitors. The AAT group showed an increase in overall satisfaction with life when compared to the control group.
2. Garrity et al studied elderly persons who had recently lost a spouse. Pets appeared to provide a powerful buffering effect against grief and stress and were associated with significantly less depression.
3. In 1995, Canadian researcher Raina studied 1,054 people aged over 65. Her studies revealed that pet owners were more able to maintain activities of daily living (ADL) over a one year period. Dogs in particular helped keep people active and provide a routine and a "reason to get up in the morning."

Elderly people constitute a segment of the population at greater risk of a variety of physical and emotional problems. Research reveals that pet ownership may help protect the elderly from health decline caused by stress factors. Despite the evidence, many nursing homes still do not allow pets and fear of giving up their animal companion is a serious concern for many in the elderly community.

More Information

This article presents only a few examples from the history of research into the relationship between people and companion animals. Hundreds more scientific articles can be searched online at www.anthrozoology.org, a website portal to the world of human animal interaction research.



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Building on your strengths within the shelter environment. cont.

At the end of each work day, write down three things that went well and the reasons why they went well. Identify your strengths and use them.

About Shelter Research

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

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Kate and her dogs, Archie and Joseph

happiness, while effective, are typically short lasting (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). For example, the pleasure you feel when eating chocolate soon fades as you take that last bite.

Engagement – is about gratifications. Happiness derived from this pathway tends to be longer lasting than happiness derived from pleasure. Engagement can typically be achieved by participating in activities that utilise our skills. These activities often absorb us and we tend to lose our sense of time (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). Such activities may include hobbies such as gardening, the pursuit of further education, and teaching someone a new skill.

Meaning – concerns the pursuit of something larger than yourself. The pursuit of meaning often gives us purpose in life (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). There are a number of ways to increase meaning in our lives. Some of these may include participating in religious activities, contributing to charities or volunteering.

While one pathway is not necessarily better than the others, the most effective way to experience happiness and therefore life satisfaction is to pursue all three pathways (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005a).

Tips on how to be happier at work

Gratitude journal

At the end of each work day, write down three things that went well and the reasons why they went well.

Researchers found that people who wrote down three good things in a journal every day for one week reported higher levels of happiness than those that did not use a journal. The effect was still observed six months after the intervention (Seligman & Steen, 2005).

Practice forgiveness

Many of us feel angry or hurt because we feel an injustice has occurred. Our anger may be directed at a person, situations or an event. Whomever or whatever the transgressor, holding on to these feelings will not change the situation that is occurred - it will only make you feel bad. Choose not to harbour resentment and instead practice forgiveness. Research suggests there is a relationship between forgiveness and happiness (Maltby, Day & Barber, 2005). Forgiveness does not mean that you are condoning, excusing or forgetting the behaviour.

Identify your strengths and use them

If you are not sure what your strengths are take the VIA Signature Strengths (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005b) questionnaire found at this website - www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu. In an intervention where participants were asked to use their top signature strength in a new way for one week, happiness levels increased for at least six months (Seligman & Steen, 2005).

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