



DOG Therapy

BY MARISSA DEGROOT

Whether you're 9 or 90, the love of a pet can lift your spirit and nourish your soul. Maybe you've felt the stress relief of Mittens purring on your lap or Spot snuggling by your side. With more research now being done to measure the benefits of pets on mental health, the science seems to be backing up those real-life experiences. According to the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI), "A broad range of investigations have found that animal-human interactions reduce anxiety, depression, and loneliness as they enhance social support and general well-being."

HABRI hopes to see the "human-animal bond be universally embraced as an essential element of human wellness." They help fund and share research, some of which has shown evidence of decreases in depression in elderly residents of a nursing home with a resident dog. Other studies have shown patients that received a dog therapy visit had the greatest decrease in anxiety compared with control groups.

While we at Dane County Humane Society (DCHS) are not experts in human mental health, we do see the positive impact animals have on the

people around them every day. For DCHS volunteer Kay, the positivity her one-year-old Maltese mix dog, Jessie, brought to her life was immediately apparent, and she knew she wanted to share this joy with others.

Jessie was found stray in Oregon. When Kay, a 10-year veteran volunteer at DCHS, met Jessie, it was love at first sight. "A furry miracle came into my life and changed it forever."

Kay and Jessie often visit a close friend with a progressive medical condition, and their friend found so much joy spending time with this little pup.

These positive experiences convinced Kay that she and Jessie could become a therapy team and help even more people around them.

Once they passed their Pet Partners behavior evaluation, Kay and Jessie began visiting senior homes, hospitals, and libraries. After just one year as a therapy team, they have already touched the lives of hundreds of people in Dane County.

When visiting hospitals, patients always have a smile on their face when they see Jessie. Hospital employees and family and friends of patients tell Kay that Jessie's visits help their loved ones get through the tough days.

Jessie continues to bring joy to those she meets, lowering their stress and anxiety levels and enhancing their well-being. She does the same for Kay. "As a retired person, I wasn't sure how not having a paid work life would affect me. As it turns out, volunteering at the Humane Society and doing dog therapy work with Jessie has given me a purpose in life."

Kay says her work with Jessie and other animals at DCHS helps take her mind off her multiple battles with lung cancer. Even though she has been cancer-free for four years, Kay says the memory of it still lingers. When she and Jessie spend afternoons as a therapy team, Kay seldom thinks about those difficult times.

Whether it's interactions with trained therapy animals or snuggles on the couch with your pet, there is mounting evidence that a strong human-animal bond can play a vital role in health and well-being. Every year, thousands of companion animals from DCHS find loving homes in our community. These families are not only welcoming animals in need into their homes, but are also making a positive impact on their own personal mental health.

At the time of this writing, Marissa DeGroot was the public relations coordinator at DCHS.

Photographs provided by DCHS.



DCHS is a nonprofit, community-supported organization providing refuge, healing, and new beginnings to over 9,000 companion animals, exotic species, farm animals, and injured and orphaned wild animals every year. The shelter is open admission, accepting all animals that need assistance, and has an adoption guarantee, meaning all healthy or treatable animals can stay at DCHS as long as it takes to find a loving home.



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