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Furry friends can change
our physical and mental
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Creature

Having regular contact with animals improves people's outlook and physical and mental health. Elaine Yau looks at the power of pets



comforts

Bouncing a yellow ball, Kei runs around to catch the attention of Fat Fat the pug. The bubbly 17-year-old giggles at the way the dog moves and it's hard to picture him as a disgruntled youth who stayed at home all day and shut himself off from the world a year ago.

His self-imposed home confinement lasted a year. The school dropout, who now works at the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church, Youth Employment Training and Creativity Development Centre, says it's still tempting to stay home playing video games. "But I know I have to go out. If I don't go to work, no one will take Fat Fat out for strolls," he says.

Fat Fat, the resident dog at the centre in Tsz Wan Shan, is a former stray rescued by the Hong Kong Animal Therapy Foundation in February and adopted by the centre in April to help withdrawn young people reintegrate into society.

Kei and his friend Kuen, 19, who locked himself away at home for a year before emerging back into the world in 2009, were given the task of caring for the four-year-old pug among their other chores at the centre. The change in both young men, from morose couch potatoes to responsible workers, shows the benefits of animal therapy, says psychiatrist William Fan Tak-wing, who started the foundation a year ago.

"The presence of animals gives withdrawn youths a sense of security," he says. "Overwhelmed by exam pressures and family problems, such youths have low self-esteem. Unable to find a job, they don't know how to face society. Dogs are non-judgmental. Regardless of your appearance and social status, they are always friendly and eager to please."

The therapeutic effects of pet ownership manifest most obviously in the elderly, mentally disabled and psychologically unstable children that he treats, Fan says.

"I always advise my elderly patients who are living alone to adopt a cat, which is easier to keep than a dog," he adds.

"Their stubborn and crabby traits lessen after living with the animal for a while. For families with mentally challenged people, owning a pet can help the disabled better control their emotions and learn to be co-operative by making them take care of the animals."

The benefits of keeping pets, or companion animals as researchers call them, are well-documented in medical literature. Pet owners are

found to have better immunity and lower cholesterol and blood pressure than non-owners.

Research presented at the 10th International Conference on Human-Animal Interaction in October 2004 on 11,000 people in Australia, Germany and China, found that pet owners made 8 per cent fewer visits to doctors even after factors such as gender and income were taken into account.

A recent study by Miami and Saint Louis universities showed that pet owners were happier, healthier and better-adjusted than non-owners. The study, which was published online in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, delved into the well-being, personality and emotional attachments of 217 pet owners and non-owners. Pet owners are shown to have greater self-esteem and are more extroverted, conscientious and physically fit.

Stroking Bobby the dog or tickling Kitty the cat could also serve as chemical pick-me-ups, Fan says. "Playing with a pet can boost levels of dopamine and serotonin, the

neurotransmitters known to affect mood, and bring calming and pleasurable effects."

A local study in 2007 found that in the presence of dogs, dementia patients displayed higher levels of activity, social interaction and frequency of pleasant emotional expressions. In the study, several dogs from Animals Asia, an anti-animal cruelty charity, were sent to the Jockey Club Centre for Positive Ageing for a dozen weekly sessions with 25 elderly dementia patients.

But the centre's director, Timothy Kwok Chi-yui, says the effects of dog companionship fizzled out a day after the dogs visited. "For animal therapy to have abiding effects, patients need prolonged exposure to animals."

At Tuen Mun Public Riding School, Timothy Tsang Tin-chi, 16, who has a moderate form of cerebral palsy, is busy cleaning and brushing 11-year-old Opal, a chestnut pony. Having ridden the steed for a year, he credits it with strengthening his muscles and increasing the flexibility in his limbs. "I couldn't crouch down before. Now I have no problem doing it when giving Opal a bath," he says.

The school works with the Riding for the Disabled Association, which uses horses to treat those with physical or mental disabilities and autistic children. The association's instructor, Sue Gazzi, says the horses' docile personality makes them an ideal healer of human ailments.

"They are calm, co-operative and obedient," she says. "They love interaction with humans and adore attention. They know they are



At Tuen Mun Public Riding School, horse riding has helped Timothy Tsang (16, left) and Natasha Tse (14) overcome their disabilities

dealing with disabled people. They behave really well. They don't move or push, as if they know they have to be careful with the disabled riding on them. They are much more unruly when others ride them. I have seen it so many times that it can't be an accident."

She says horse riding could help people with all kinds of disabilities. An hour of riding is equivalent to 20 hours of physiotherapy because it works the whole body rather than just parts of it. "With the exception of people with uncontrolled epilepsy, a heart defect or brittle bones, anybody can gain much from riding horses as it improves circulation, breathing, posture and flexibility."

"Mentally, horse riding boosts the self-esteem of the disabled. With their siblings playing all kinds of sports like rugby, riding horses gives them certain status in the family as they also have their own activity."

This sense of empowerment is the main element that attracts Natasha Tse Pui-ting, 14, to riding. Born two months early, she suffers from a severe form of cerebral palsy and dyslexia. "I can only experience the sense of speed on horseback," says the teenager, who can't run or ride a bicycle due to weak leg muscles.

Her instructor, Yumi Toda, says Natasha's health has improved greatly since she took up horse riding 10 years ago. "Her limbs are much stronger than before. She had to be supported by two people when walking in the past. Now she can put her foot in the stirrup to mount the horse by herself."

Gazzi says the key to devising

horse therapy lessons is to match the patients with the right horses. Those with cerebral palsy have very tight legs; a horse that has a relaxed, easy gait and does not trot is best for them. Those with Down's syndrome have difficulty sitting up; a horse with a choppy gait will help tone their muscles.

Natasha's mother, Gail Siah Ai-leng, says her daughter's love for horses has become a driving force in her life. "She wants to work with horses when she grows up. She loves horses so much that she reads and watches videos about them all the time."

Likewise, Kei's love for Fat Fat and their daily routine of strolls, grooming sessions and visits to the vet has created a strong bond between them. "I talk to him whenever I am unhappy," Kei says. "He knows when you are scolding him. I want him to be healthy and happy. When he first came here, he was really heavy. I am so happy that my exercise with him has helped him lose 4.5 kilograms."

The emotional bond between humans and animals has many psychological benefits, says Jane McNae, veterinary nursing lecturer at the University of London's Royal Veterinary College.

"Keeping pets teaches children about empathy, compassion and responsibility," she says.

"As animals have a shorter lifespan, pets prepare children for different stages of life, from birth to illness and death. For old people who have grown lonely after their kids grow up, animals provide very good company."

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WILLIAM FAN, PSYCHIATRIST



Fat Fat the pug has helped Kei (17) and Kuen (19) learn responsibility and reintegrate into society. Photos: Nora Tam, K. Y. Cheng