



‘When Animals matter, our Mental Health’s better’: Incorporating the benefits of animals in assessment and management strategies by health clinicians.

Verushka Krigovsky

Practitioner member of Medical board of Australia

Abstract:

Mental illness or ongoing psychological stresses can have negative effects on the bio-psycho-social spheres for individuals of all ages.

7.3 million Australians experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime with 8 taking their life every day (1). \$43 to 51 billion is the direct expenditure with \$15 billion being informal care provided by family and friends (2).

It is well documented that interaction with animals results in positive effects on physical and psychological health and enhances empathy, compassion and self-worth, and offers companionship and non-judgemental acceptance.

Unfortunately, the field of mental health has historically undervalued and paid little attention to the significance of human-animal bonds, particularly when trying to understand family functioning. Asking about pets can shed light on the family system, risk of harm to humans if there is pet abuse or neglect and loss of a pet can be the trigger for current psychological symptoms.

This paper presents the findings from 2019 original research carried out in remote Central Australia.

Four hundred and four participants from eight venues (Alice Springs Hospital Community Mental Health Service Outpatient Department, Palliative Care Unit, Todd Mall Market Stall, two veterinary practices, the Finke remote Aboriginal Community, Alice Springs Hospital Foyer stall, and Pets Day Out Stall) shared their experiences about how animals supported and maintained their mental health, in a “Paws for a Comment” book placed at each venue, posing the question ‘Are animals good for our mental health?’. Some responses contained

several elements of human-animal interactions.

The major recurring themes were (a) source of unconditional love, N = 132, (b) companionship, N=132, (c) a necessary element for mental health, N = 116, (d) prosocial behaviour, namely having someone to care for, N=53, and (e) beneficial for Alzheimer’s sufferers and nursing home environments, N = 22. Minor themes were: (1) animals being a source of stress management N= 20, (2) animals providing love & joy N = 20, (3) animals help with grieving N=6 and (4) animals rights N=3.

A numerical rank of the comments per venue demonstrated that the Outpatients comment book

captured most interest and elicited the most mental health protective endorsements (N=242).

This qualitative data from the participants highlights the tangible benefits of including animal related questions in mental health assessments, and supportive therapy as this connection provides a protective element for the patient during their illness, recovery and return to stable mental health.

Biography:

Verushka Krigovsky is a practitionary member of Medical Board of Australia

Publication of speakers:

1. Krigovsky, Verushka & Paton, Anne & Roulstone, Rodney & Djamalaka, Joan & Cord-Udy, Nigel. (2011). EAST ARNHEM AND TOP END INDIGENOUS MENTAL HEALTH: CYCLONES, CROCODILES, BLACK MAGIC AND MAINSTREAM SERVICES. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry. 45. A30-A30.

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