

Pets help lift the human spirit

Four-legged therapists are everywhere — assisting children, veterans in programs and homes.

The value of animals as therapists cannot be denied. There has been research, including the now often-cited 2012 study showing a relationship between human-animal interactions and oxytocin levels, that supports the notion that animals can help make people feel better. But for animal lovers, no more proof is required than gazing into their dog's eyes and seeing the warmth projected back.

"The benefits are truly endless," said Tania Bhattacharyya, executive director of New Directions for Women in Costa Mesa, a nonprofit drug and alcohol rehabilitation program for women that, among its other therapies, has a volunteer golden retriever, Lola, who visits regularly with those in recovery.

Pet therapist for addiction

Six-year-old Lola visits New Directions for Women every Saturday with owner David Hertzberg, who adopted her in 2012 from a rescue. Lola is certified through the Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program. Lola has been volunteering at the facility since March. "It's been extremely transformational

and impactful already," Bhattacharyya said. She sees it in the faces of the women in recovery. "Immediately their faces light up. It's like they have no problems in the world. ... They see this bundle of unconditional love and joy walking towards them. Their entire demeanors change."

PTSD service dogs

Huntington Beach-based Heal Our Troops America is a nonprofit that assists veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and other related disorders through complementary therapies, including the use of service dogs. The dogs, many of which are rescues, are matched with individual veterans and trained over 18 to 24 months with them. CEO Darcy MacDuff recalls one of many success stories in which a veteran with PTSD went from very suicidal to happily married with a baby. "Mike says (his service dog) Lucy saved his life," MacDuff said. To donate: healourtroopsamerica.com

Therapy dogs for abused children

The Orange County SPCA in Huntington Beach partnered with the Orange County District Attorney's Office to create PAWS Assist the Needs of the



District Attorney (PANDA) in 2015, which uses some of the OCSPCA's Pets Are Wonderful Support (PAWS) therapy teams to comfort child sexual assault and abuse victims when meeting with district attorney's staff before trial. "It is not at all uncommon for the children to form a special bond of trust with their furry friend, allowing them the courage and strength to attend meetings," said Kevin Marlin, OCSPCA PAWS and PANDA program director.

Canine literacy program


The OCSPCA also has therapy handler-dog teams that visit with at-risk students to help them improve their reading skills by providing nonjudgmental canine and human ears when these students read aloud. "Our Canine Lit Program is about working with children who (are) at-risk or below grade level in reading to help boost their confidence and improve their reading and verbal skills," Marlin said. To donate: OCSPCA.com

Office dogs

Ruby Louis, general manager of Pacific View Mortuary and Memorial Park in Corona del Mar, said the mortuary's open-dog policy began in 2007, when one of

the employees asked if she could bring her puppy to work. That one dog has grown to between three and six on any given day. "We deal with very delicate and sensitive issues all day long," Louis said. "It only takes a puppy walking over to someone's desk or wandering into my office and I'll instantly decompress." And the doggie interactions aren't limited to employees. When families arranging services for their loved ones learn about the dogs in the office, they often want to meet them, too.

Cancer detection

SniffingOutCancer.org is a nonprofit supporting research studying canines as an early detection scent tool for breast cancer. Though based in Florida, the group is fundraising to make it possible for lower income people nationwide to participate in a study using specially trained canine scent dogs to detect breast cancer from breath and saliva samples, according to Heather Junqueira, president of parent company BioScent K9. "The amazing power of canine scent detection is what makes this all possible," she said. 

Jessica Peralta lives in Aliso Viejo with her cat, Riot, and German shepherd, Guinness.