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INTERACTION

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF DOGS AND WELLBEING

Interaction Opinion – Brigid Hardy

At Interaction Consulting, we love dogs, and there are lots of great reasons why!

Dogs have been human companions for thousands of years, offering us unconditional love, support, and joy. But did you know that the relationship between humans and dogs goes beyond companionship? The connection between dogs and human wellbeing has been of growing interest among scientists and researchers in the field of neuroscience.

The Power of the Canine-Human Bond

The bond between humans and dogs is deeply rooted in evolutionary history. As humans transitioned from hunter-gatherer societies to settled communities, dogs became domesticated and played a vital role as hunting partners, protectors, and companions. This symbiotic relationship has had a profound impact on the human brain.

1. Oxytocin Release: Interacting with dogs triggers the release of oxytocin, often referred to as the "love hormone" or "bonding hormone." This hormone is associated with social bonding and attachment. Research has shown that both humans and dogs experience increased oxytocin levels when they interact, strengthening the emotional connection between us.

2. Stress Reduction: The presence of a dog can have a calming effect on the human nervous system. Studies have demonstrated that petting a dog or simply being in their company can reduce stress hormones, lower blood pressure, and decrease heart rate. This effect is particularly valuable in high-stress situations and for individuals dealing with anxiety and depression.

3. Emotional Regulation: Dogs have an innate ability to detect human emotions. They respond to our emotional cues, offering comfort and support when we are troubled or anxious. This emotional regulation is particularly beneficial for individuals with mood disorders or post-traumatic stress.

4. Physical Activity: Owning a dog often leads to increased physical activity, as dogs require regular exercise. This not only improves physical health but also contributes to mental wellbeing. Regular exercise is associated with the release of endorphins, which can enhance mood and reduce symptoms of depression.

5. Social Interaction: Dogs serve as social catalysts, making it easier for humans to connect with one another. Dog owners often find themselves engaging in conversations with strangers while out on walks or at dog parks. This increased social interaction can combat feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The Healing Role of Dogs

The neuroscientific evidence supporting the benefits of the canine-human bond is compelling, and it has led to the development of therapy dog programs in various settings, from hospitals to schools. Therapy dogs, specially trained to provide comfort and support, are increasingly used to improve the wellbeing of individuals facing physical and emotional challenges.

1. Hospitals: Therapy dogs visit hospitals to provide companionship to patients. These visits have been shown to reduce anxiety, pain, and the length of hospital stays. The comforting presence of a dog can make medical procedures less daunting.

2. Schools: Dogs in schools help reduce stress and anxiety among students. They can also assist children with special needs by promoting emotional regulation and social interaction.

3. Assistance Dogs: Beyond therapy dogs, there are assistance dogs trained to support individuals with specific needs, such as those with mobility impairments or post-traumatic stress disorder. These dogs play an important role in enhancing the independence and quality of life for their owners.

The neuroscience of dogs and human wellbeing reveals the incredible impact these loyal companions have on our lives. Their ability to release oxytocin, reduce stress, provide emotional support, and promote physical activity underscores the depth of the bond we share. Dogs aren't just pets; they are healers, confidants, and sources of unwavering love. As we continue to unlock the secrets of this remarkable connection, it's clear that the paws in our lives contribute significantly to our overall happiness and wellbeing. So, the next time you look into your dog's eyes, remember that the love you share isn't just in your heart; it's in your brain, too.

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