

Pet therapy: The healing power of pets

What is it? This therapy is based on the support of pets (such as dogs, cats, rabbits, parrots, and tortoises) and is matched to other therapies both to treat psychological disabilities, such as autism, and physical disabilities (hearing and sight impairment, mobility impairment), along with learning disabilities such as anxiety, hyperactivity disorder, and autism.

The pet is the co-therapist helping the patient, along with psychologists and other specialists (pedagogues, welfare workers, and specialized dog instructors) trigger off, spontaneously, game stimuli for children and temporary attention stimuli (dog's care, caresses) for elderly people and depressed patients.

Pet-assisted therapies Pet-assisted therapy specialists avail themselves of dogs and cats, but also of rabbits and tortoises. And even of parrots having received a "human imprint", that is, who were weaned at 20 days and looked after by man so that they develop a close relationship with their human parents/instructors.

Pet-assisted therapies' specialists select their pets following a gradual pattern: they generally start with rabbits who are accepted by children easily since, as a rule, they are not afraid of them.

Later on parrots, and then cats and dogs, are used.

Parrots are used since, because of their way of speaking, they stimulate patients to answer; in general, children are more sensitive to this kind of stimuli. The opposite is also possible: for example, a child is stimulated in order to make the parrot talk.

Effects on patients All cases showed improved attention and, for those patients making violent and unexpected movements, an improved capacity to control their body.

As to language, patients get used to talk to the animal and express their feelings, which, for example, is particularly hard for autistic patients.

Starting a pet-assisted therapy First you have to get information about specialized centres.

This kind of therapies are quite wide-spread in Italy, even though a decree by the Ministry of health is still awaiting enforcement, which will regulate and acknowledge this activity and the vocational courses needed to work in this field, in order to help citizens sort out valid organizations from unprofessional or amateurish ones.

Remember that in a pet-associated therapy centre you will always find a therapist (a psychologist, a pedagogue, etc.), an animal trainer, a vet and other social workers having attended ad hoc qualification courses (child care workers developing motor skills on a play-based approach).

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