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HEART FELT CONNECTIONS WITH PETS IN THERAPY

By Jennifer Moore

Many of us in the field of psychotherapy have sat with clients who have gone to considerable lengths to care for their companion animals beyond what might be deemed rational, or clients who have struggled more with the loss of a pet than with the loss of a family member. For some therapists this may be puzzling. For others, this may be completely understandable and resonant with their own experiences.

There are many types of relationships humans form with animals. The most common bond is with family pets. Animals also serve human needs in the role of service animals or therapy animals. It is clear that animals support our lives in many ways with what Carl Rogers described as “unconditional positive regard.” They don’t criticize, betray or shame us. They don’t care what we wear, what religion we practice, what race, ethnicity or sexuality we are or how much money we make. We humans are at once equal and special to our pets, regardless of how we are perceived in the world by other human beings. As a psychotherapist with a practice in animal communication, I have met with many people and their animal companions together. It is this place where our human and animal lives intersect that is the focus of what I’d like to share here.

Humans are fortunate to have both movement and words with which to express the complexity of their lives. In the practice of psychotherapy, we encourage people to talk, to literally “speak

their truth”, however frightening and painful that may be. In my practice of animal communication, I support both people and animals through their shared life challenges by bringing words to the process. Animals express a range of emotions and needs primarily through movement and sound. During a session with my clients and their pet, I attune my awareness to the pets’ nonverbal space where they communicate. There is often a noticeable shift in animals’ postures or behaviors during sessions when I’ve been able to articulate something important for them and they know they’ve been understood by their human companions. This physical shifting often serves as evidence that the communication between us is “real”, further validating the impact of our dialogue, such as when a cat that has been lying quietly during a session suddenly starts purring.

Part of my role in a session is to gather information about an animal to help the human family members make an informed decision regarding their pet. Difficult decisions sometimes have to be made such as whether a challenging animal is a good fit in a family or how best to proceed with an ailing pet’s needs. Yet, as with any client in a system where there is an identified patient, sometimes a particular animal’s issue are symptomatic of a pattern within a larger family dynamic. It is therefore this relationship I am exploring in my sessions with people and animals, as well as the presenting issues.

Within these sessions I am often witness to and moved by the deeply felt connections between us. What consistently inspires me is the trust, willingness, and empathy that I experience between humans and animals. I believe that, because animals express themselves fully through their bodies, we humans are invited to connect with them from a more embodied place too. Bypassing the more analytical part of our brains allows us to move into deeper connection, without the defensiveness or shame that may arise more readily in our relationships with other people.

Whatever your views relative to the work of animal communication or experience with animals, you can support your clients’ growth by knowing more about the animals in their lives. A therapeutic inquiry can help a client discern between skillful care for a beloved animal and what might be a projection of their own needs onto their pets. Unresolved guilt or grief over a deceased pet might open the door to an unhealed wound of abandonment or loss in someone’s family history. On the other side of the coin, there are people who are ambivalent, don’t like or

are afraid of animals, or are part of a culture that does not regard animals as companion pets. All of these experiences are openings for exploration and growth within the therapeutic relationship.

When we have the opportunity to connect with supportive animals, we human beings are fortunate to receive fully the equality with which they perceive us and the unique ways they love us. Through our affirming bonds with animals we may be moved to open our hearts to more compassion for ourselves and other human beings as well.

In your psychotherapy practice, should you find yourself either sitting with a client who is stuck, working with a group that is not cohesive, or establishing rapport with a new client, ask about their kinship with animals and see what evolves from there. You may find yourself in a more relational space with each other; one that reminds us human beings that, in the midst of our complex lives, we belong and that heartfelt connections are possible and can sustain us on this journey.



ABOUT JENNIFER

Jennifer Moore, MA, BC-DMT, LPCC has been a Dance/Movement Therapist (D/MT) for 20 years. Over the course of her career she has facilitated creative arts psychotherapy groups and performances for adults living with HIV/AIDS. Currently in private practice she offers movement sessions as a foundational component towards integration, healing and growth. She brings a mindfulness-based approach to the therapeutic container, working primarily with adults. She began her practice in Animal Communication in

2009 and continues to learn from both humans and animals alike. You can read more about her practice with animals at: <https://www.dearhuman.pet/>