

H Y P E R

Action for Animal Sheltering

Title: “The Healing Power of Animals: Mental Health Benefits of Human-Animal Interaction”

● Project Number: 2024-1-EL02-ESC30-SOL-000235642

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Introduction

Mental health challenges such as stress, depression, and loneliness are at unprecedented levels worldwide. While traditional therapy and medication are vital, they are not the only solutions. Human-animal interaction offers an alternative or complementary method, one that is both natural and deeply rooted in our history. Animals provide unconditional companionship and emotional support, and science now confirms these benefits in measurable ways.

What is Human-Animal Interaction?

Human-animal interaction, or HAI, describes the relationship and exchanges that occur between people and animals. This can include pet ownership, therapy programs, volunteering in shelters, or structured animal-assisted interventions. The interaction benefits both species: humans gain emotional support, while animals receive care and companionship. This relationship is unique in its reciprocity both sides thrive.



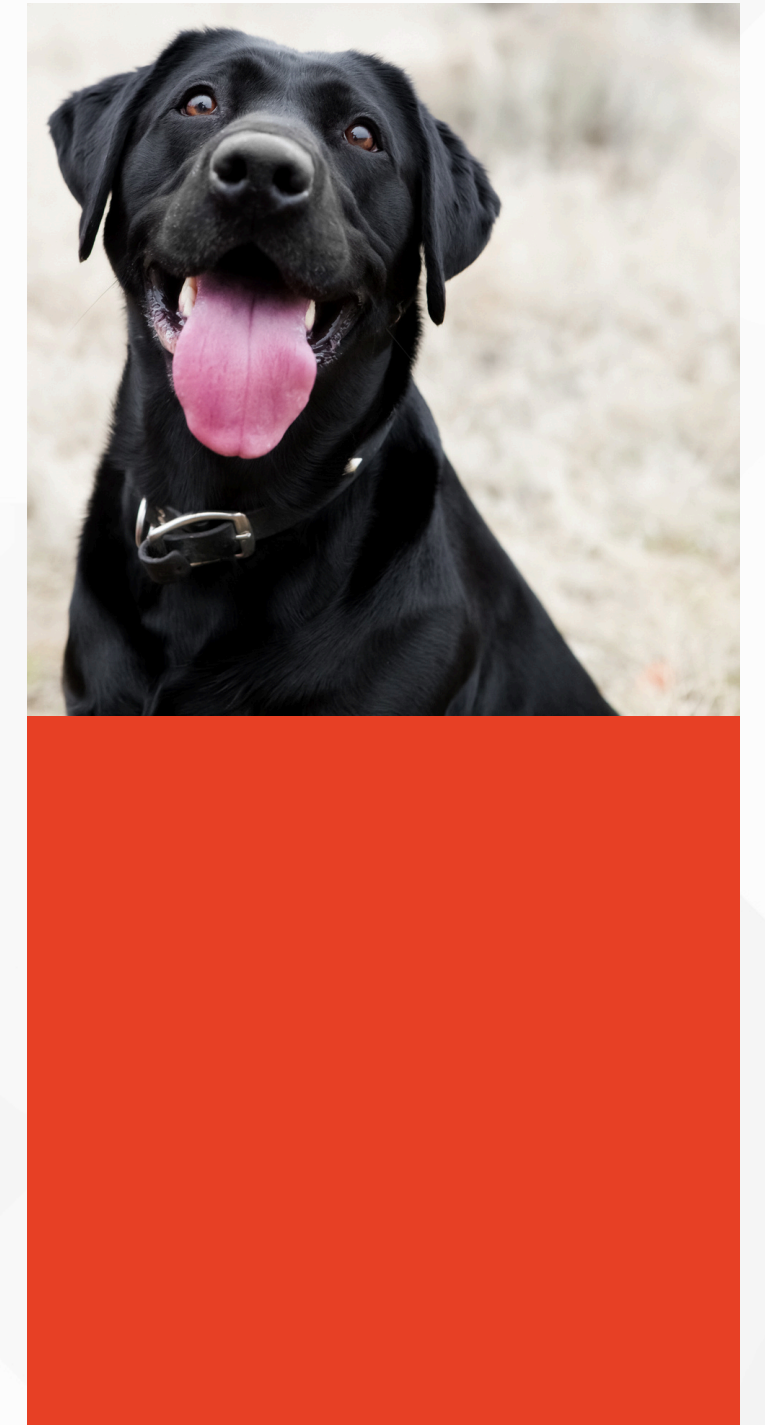
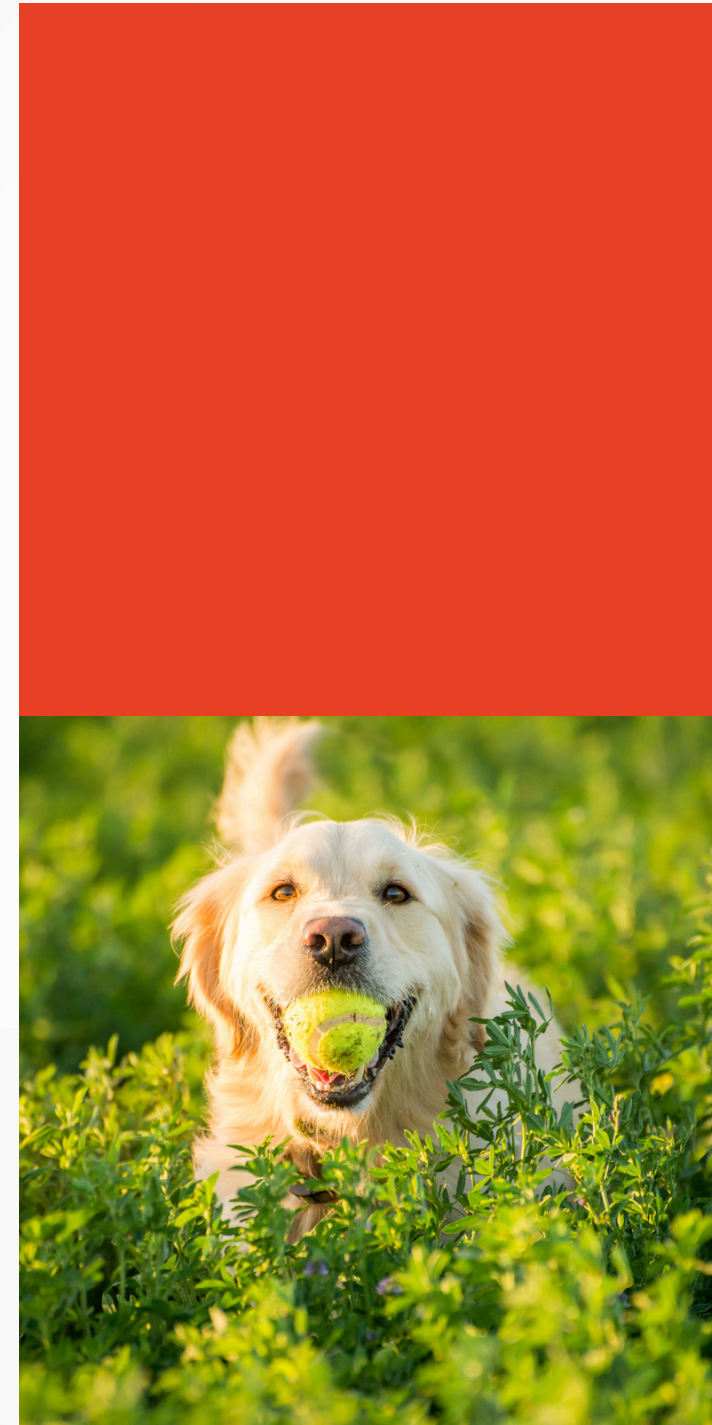
A Historical Perspective



Humans have lived alongside animals for thousands of years. Initially, animals provided survival support: dogs helped in hunting, cats protected food stores, and horses enabled transport and farming. Over time, these relationships evolved beyond utility. Animals became companions, and eventually healers, as people realized their comforting presence during times of stress and illness. This historical connection laid the foundation for today's therapeutic practices.

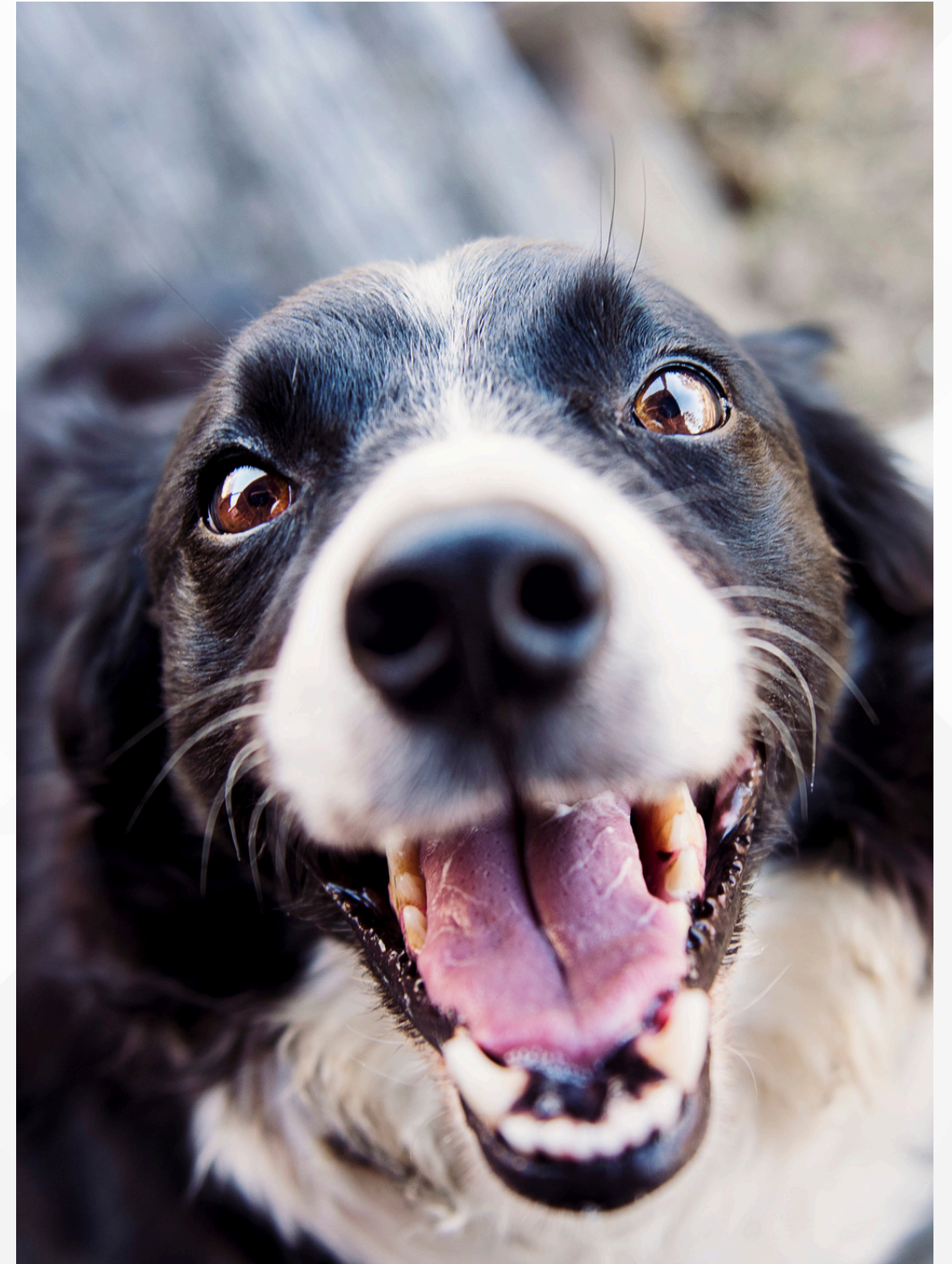
Product Overview

One of the strongest benefits of animals is their ability to reduce stress. Scientific studies show that simply petting a dog or cat lowers cortisol, the hormone responsible for stress. At the same time, oxytocin the hormone linked to bonding and trust increases. Physiological markers such as heart rate and blood pressure also improve. This demonstrates that interaction with animals is not only emotionally soothing but biologically measurable.



Relieving Anxiety

Animals provide comfort to people with anxiety disorders. Their calm, predictable presence can help ease the racing thoughts that come with anxiety. For many, animals create a sense of safety during panic attacks or stressful situations. A dog lying at one's feet or a cat purring on one's lap provides a grounding effect. Unlike humans, animals do not judge or demand; they simply offer presence, which reduces feelings of worry and fear.



Combating Loneliness

Loneliness is a major public health concern, particularly among elderly populations and people living in isolation. Animals help fill the emotional gap by providing constant companionship. They give individuals someone to care for and connect with, creating daily purpose. Pets also act as social catalysts, encouraging interaction with other people for example, through dog walking or community animal programs. In this way, animals reduce both emotional and social isolation.



Emotional Health Benefits

Beyond stress and anxiety, animals positively influence broader emotional wellbeing. Spending time with animals reduces symptoms of depression and encourages optimism. They remind us of simple joys and help create routines that give structure to life. For people struggling with low self-esteem, the unconditional love of a pet can restore confidence and emotional strength.





Social Benefits

Animals also improve social interaction. Walking a dog often leads to conversations with strangers, while therapy animals in schools and hospitals create shared experiences that bring people together. For individuals who struggle socially, animals act as bridges that break down barriers and foster communication. This social effect is especially important for young people and marginalized groups.

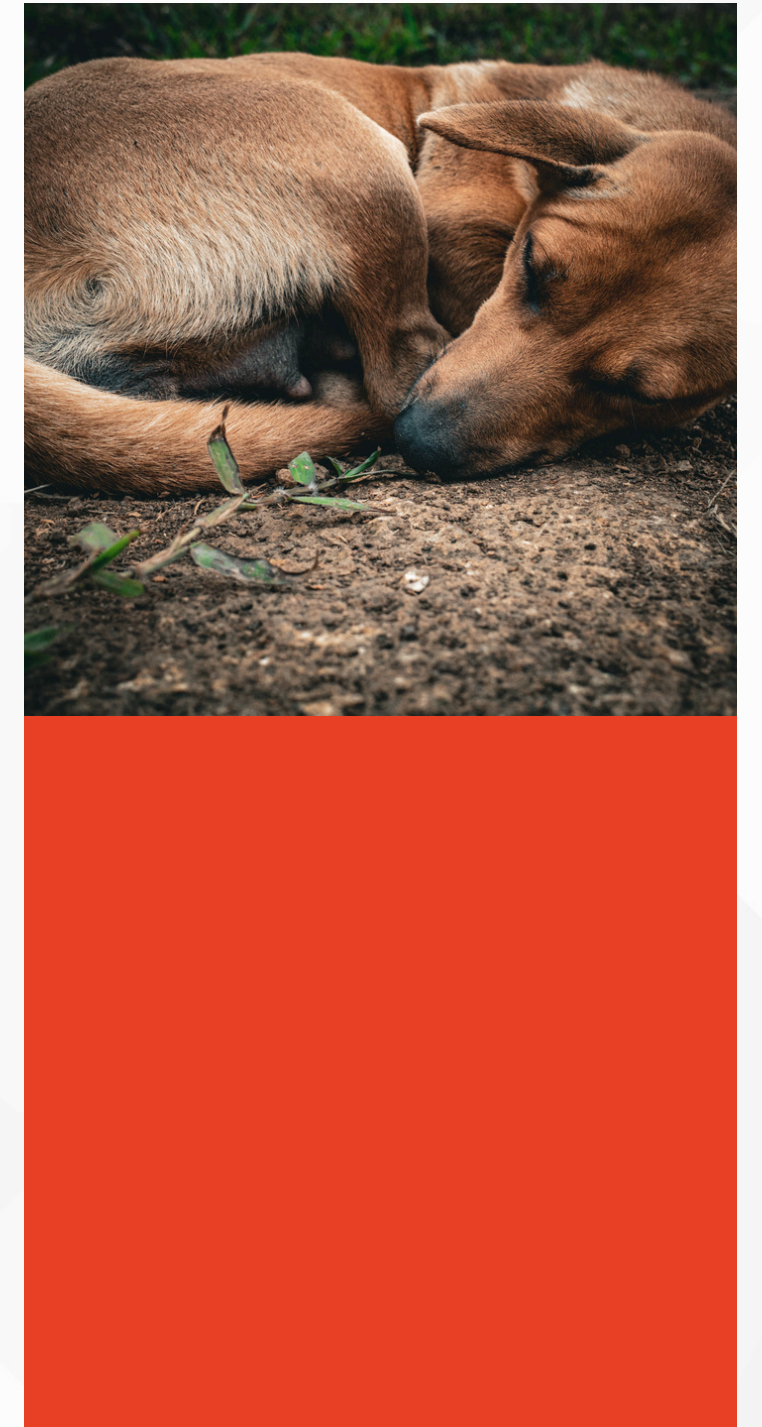
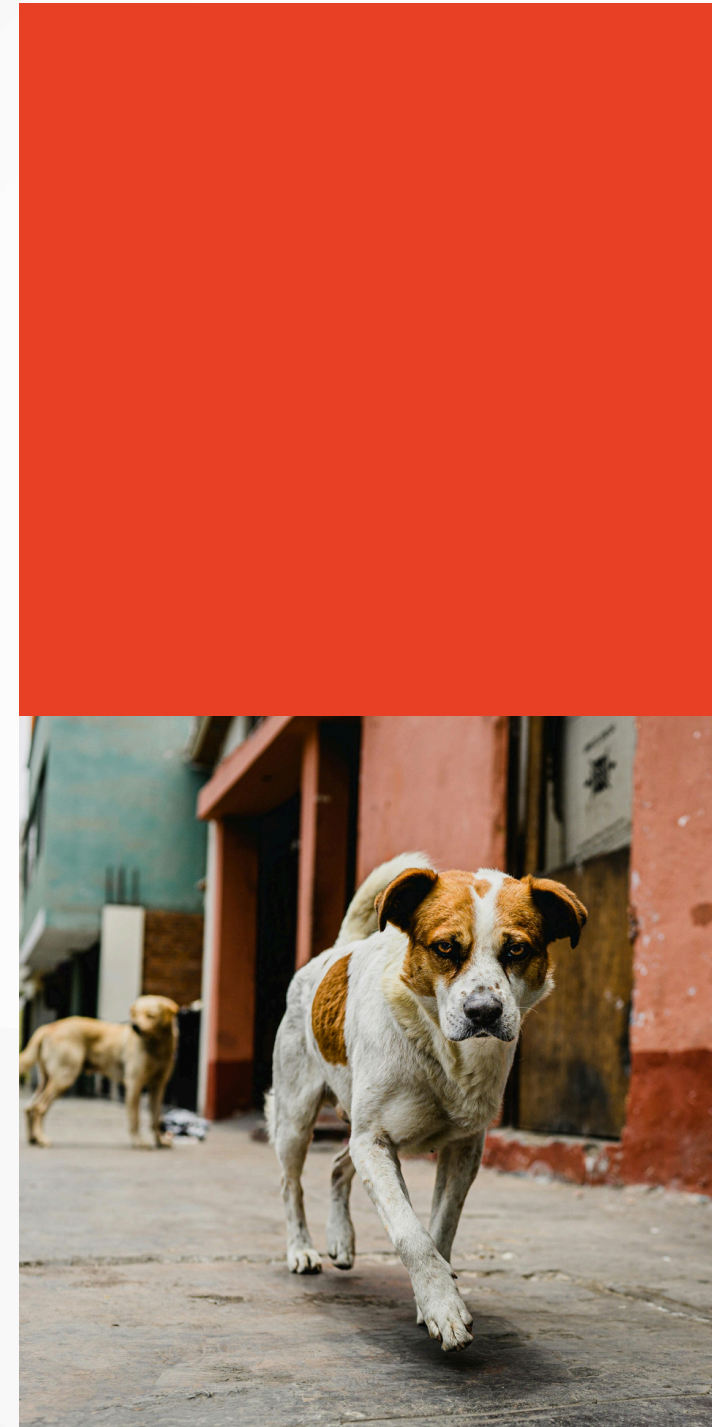
Physical Health Benefits

The benefits of animals are not limited to mental wellbeing. Physical health also improves. Pet owners, especially dog owners, are generally more physically active. Regular walks increase exercise levels, which lowers risks of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Studies also show that interacting with animals can lower blood pressure, stabilize heart rate, and even strengthen the immune system.



ADHD Support

Children and adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often struggle with focus, impulsivity, and maintaining routines. Animals offer unique support in these areas. Caring for a pet introduces structure feeding, grooming, walking all of which demand responsibility and time management. The interaction itself can calm hyperactivity and increase concentration, making animals valuable partners in ADHD management.



Scientific Evidence for ADHD

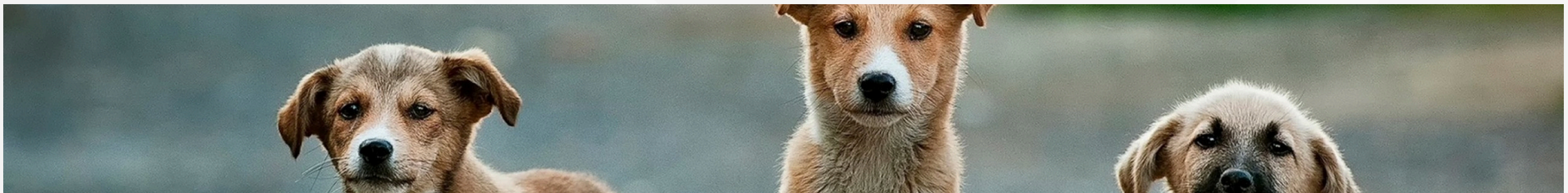
Scientific studies in Europe confirm these benefits. In classrooms with therapy dogs, children with ADHD demonstrated improved attention spans, reduced impulsivity, and better emotional regulation. Equine-assisted therapy, involving horses, helped children develop patience and empathy while improving self-control. Small animals, such as rabbits or guinea pigs, encouraged gentleness and reduced hyperactivity in young children. This evidence highlights the therapeutic power of animals in structured interventions.

Equine-Assisted Therapy

Horses are particularly powerful in therapy. Their size demands respect and calmness, encouraging children and adults to regulate their emotions. Horses mirror human behavior, making participants more aware of their own emotional state. Riding and caring for horses also develops responsibility, coordination, and empathy. Equine-assisted therapy is widely used across Europe to support children with ADHD, trauma survivors, and individuals dealing with anxiety.

Therapy Dogs

Dogs are the most common therapy animals worldwide. Their friendly, approachable nature makes them ideal for settings such as hospitals, schools, and nursing homes. Therapy dogs provide comfort to patients, reduce stress in university students during exams, and support children with learning difficulties. Scientific studies show that the presence of therapy dogs leads to measurable improvements in mood, engagement, and overall wellbeing.



Small Animal Therapy

Smaller animals, such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and birds, also have therapeutic effects. Their gentle size makes them especially suitable for children or people who feel intimidated by larger animals. Handling small animals encourages calmness, patience, and careful movements. These programs are often used in pediatric hospitals, where young patients find comfort in cuddling small, soft creatures.



European Project Spotlight: HYPER

The HYPER project in Thessaloniki, Greece, demonstrates the link between animals and inclusion. The project brings together young people, including those with ADHD, and local animal shelters. By caring for shelter animals, participants develop responsibility, teamwork, and empathy. At the same time, the animals benefit from improved welfare. This project shows how animal-assisted initiatives can strengthen both communities and individuals.





European Project Spotlight: HABRI

The Human-Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) funds and collects scientific studies across Europe and beyond. Their research consistently demonstrates that animal interaction reduces anxiety, depression, and loneliness while improving resilience. HABRI's work provides the scientific foundation that helps validate animal-assisted programs for schools, hospitals, and communities.

European Project Spotlight: Pet Alliance

Pet Alliance programs bring animals directly into schools, integrating them into educational settings. Teachers report calmer classrooms, improved focus, and increased empathy among students. Children with ADHD, in particular, benefit from the consistent presence of therapy animals, showing better behavior and learning outcomes. These programs prove the practical value of animals in education.



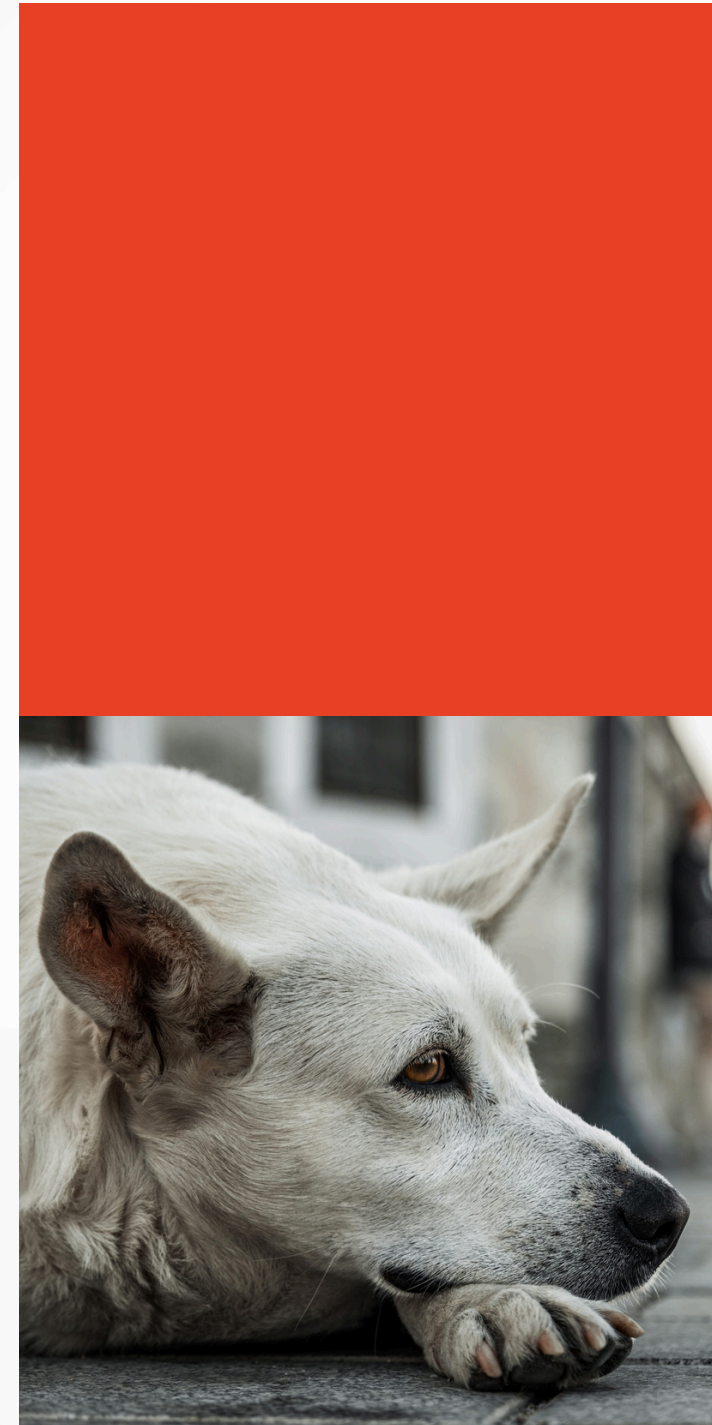
Hospital-Based Programs

In many European hospitals, therapy animals are now part of patient care. Dogs visit patients to reduce pre-surgery anxiety, comfort children undergoing treatment, and support elderly individuals with dementia. The results are significant: patients report lower anxiety, faster recovery, and higher satisfaction with their hospital experience.



University-Based Programs

Universities across Europe have introduced therapy animals, particularly during exam seasons. Students interacting with dogs or other animals report reduced stress, improved concentration, and a greater sense of balance. These programs highlight the universal impact of animals not just for children or patients, but for young adults under academic pressure.



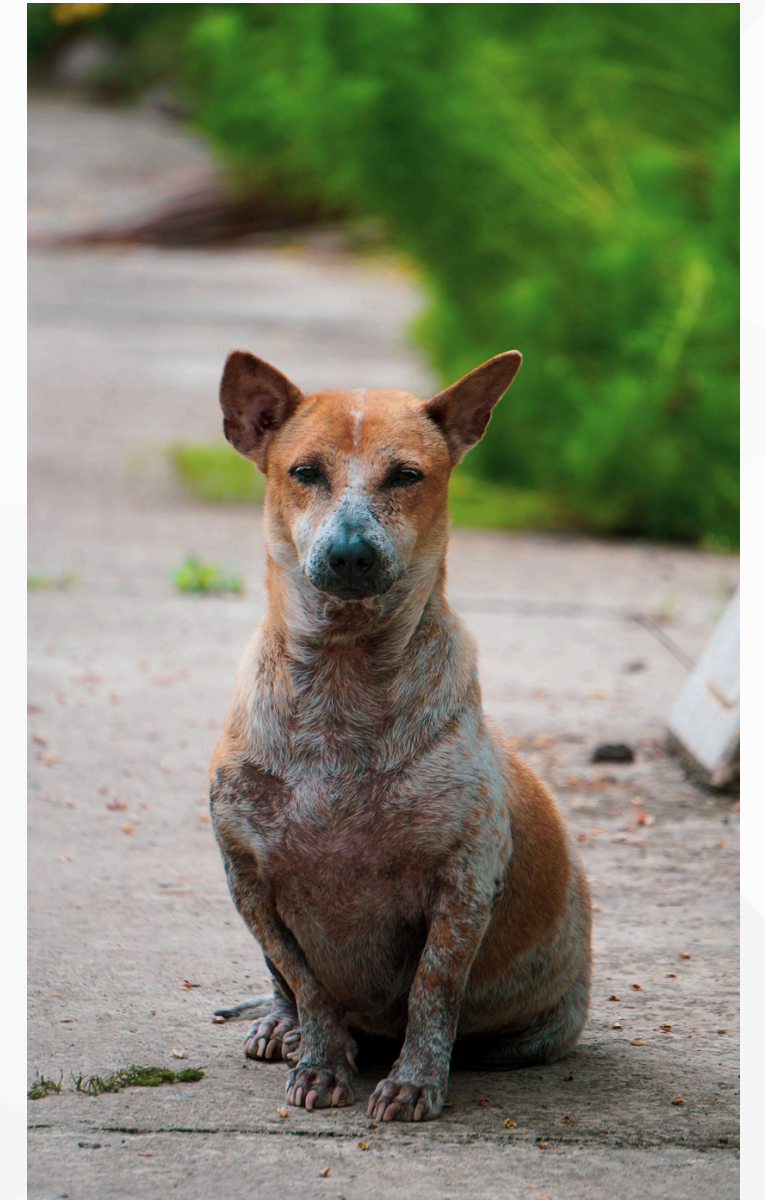
Broader Social Impact

Animal-assisted interventions also promote social inclusion. Programs involving therapy animals are often targeted at marginalized groups, including youth at risk, people with disabilities, and the elderly. Animals act as equalizers, creating a shared experience that brings people together and breaks down stigma. The broader social impact is one of connection, empathy, and community.



Ethical Considerations

While the benefits for humans are clear, we must also protect animals. Therapy animals require training, rest, and ongoing care. They must never be overworked or placed in stressful environments. Ethical animal-assisted programs prioritize the wellbeing of both humans and animals. True healing comes from a balanced, respectful relationship.



Challenges and Limitations

Despite the benefits, there are limitations. Some people cannot interact with animals due to allergies, phobias, or cultural reasons. Therapy programs also require funding, professional oversight, and careful planning to be safe and effective. Understanding these challenges ensures that programs are sustainable and inclusive.

Future Directions

The field of animal-assisted therapy is expanding. Research continues into areas such as autism, PTSD, elderly care, and rehabilitation. More schools, hospitals, and community centers are welcoming animals into their programs. As scientific evidence grows, animals are increasingly seen not just as companions, but as vital partners in human health.





Conclusion

In conclusion, the healing power of animals is real and well-supported by science. From reducing stress and anxiety to improving focus in ADHD, animals have proven their ability to enhance human wellbeing. European projects show how these benefits can be put into practice, creating inclusive programs that support both humans and animals. The human-animal bond is not just companionship it is a powerful connection that can heal, transform, and unite communities.

Module 1





Thank You

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