



Creature comforts

Service animals take the love between humans and their pets to a whole new level, providing support, care, practical help and, sometimes, life-saving intervention.

BY CATHERINE EDEN (JOURNALIST)

Janet Harding lives alone on a five-hectare smallholding in Plettenberg Bay. As a type 1 diabetic, she needs to constantly monitor her sugar levels. Helping her with this critical task – and giving her peace of mind – is Gus, a Golden Retriever, who has learned to detect changes in the smell of Janet’s saliva.

“Training him wasn’t difficult at all; we learned together with saliva samples. A dog’s nose is so much more sensitive than a human’s,” Janet explains. “If Gus picks up a change, he’ll put his head in my lap or fetch a toy to attract my attention. He has woken me during the night by tapping his chin on my shoulder, or by jumping on the bed and panting in my face. He goes everywhere with me and is completely socialised and beautifully behaved. At work he’s been known to go in and out of my landlord’s office to alert him when I haven’t paid heed to his signals.”

Janet’s previous service dog, Chester, saved her life by barking for five hours one Saturday, until a neighbour came to investigate and found Janet in a coma on the kitchen floor. Like Gus, Chester was with her 24 hours a day, and soon picked up on the difference between low and high sugar.

“It was an enormous loss when he died in 2012, as he was totally dependable and always correct in his assessment,” Janet says. “Gus has a gentler temperament, so his signals are more subtle... but he, too, has never been wrong.”

Devotion to duty

“Therapy animals fall into two broad camps,” says Karis Nafté, Knysna dog trainer and animal behaviourist. “There are those that are trained to do practical or medically related tasks, and there are those that are certified as suitable to interact with the physically or mentally disabled, the lonely or people needing emotional support of some kind.

“As an animal expert, what I find most fascinating about therapy animals is that they will accept behaviour from disabled people that they wouldn’t normally tolerate. They aren’t spooked by erratic movements or sounds; they can sense that the person’s intentions aren’t unkind.”

Overseas all kinds of animals are used – including monkeys, ducks and parrots – but in South Africa, registered therapy animals are mainly dogs, cats and horses. “It’s the individual personality that matters, rather than the breed,” explains Karis. “The animal must be delighted to interact with strangers, have impeccable manners and be ‘bomb-proof’ in that they are able to stay calm under strange circumstances. The difference they make to people’s lives is unquestionable.”

Guide dogs for the visually impaired are perhaps the most widely encountered service animals in South Africa, but in other parts of the world, where specialised training is available, therapy animals help with mobility, respond to doorbells, fetch medication, or detect oncoming seizures. >

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A seizure-alert dog will tug at clothing to make his human lie down. He may be trained to clear a space around the person, or to protect the body by lying across it until the episode is over. Similarly, some dogs provide pressure therapy by lying on top of people experiencing acute anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder flashbacks.

In Scotland, the Dementia Dog project – a collaboration between students at the Glasgow School of Art, Alzheimer’s Scotland, Dogs for the Disabled and Guide Dogs Scotland – helps people in the early stages of dementia to maintain daily routines and stay active and engaged.

Why your pet perks you up

Reams have been written about the bond between humans and animals, both domestically and in the wild. Animal lovers don’t need proof to convince them of their therapeutic effect, but for sceptics there is plenty of research to show that interacting with animals lowers blood pressure and heart rate, and alleviates depression.

“Dogs are known to make a difference to the physiological and psychological health of humans. They can prevent, predict and facilitate recovery from ill-health and can also play a role in reducing levels of stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness,” says Marieanna le Roux, lecturer in Psychology at Stellenbosch University, human-animal interaction researcher and chair of Pets as Therapy (PAT), an organisation based mainly in the Western Cape.

PAT volunteers take dogs to retirement homes, facilities for the mentally challenged, hospitals and other places where residents can benefit from interacting with these loveable, patient animals. In Gauteng, an organisation called TopDogs does similar work.

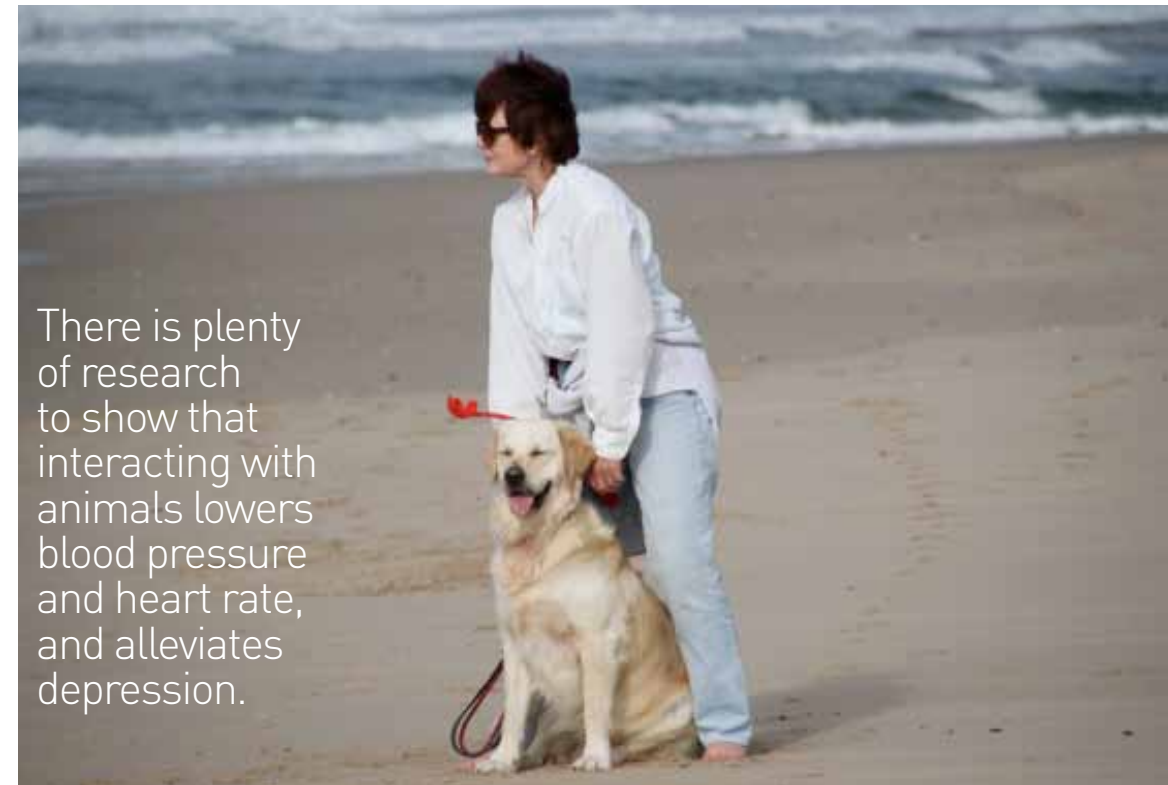
Genine Shuttleworth from Simon’s Town makes monthly visits to a retirement complex, along with a group of dedicated friends. Genine’s pug, Gordon, is a PAT-registered therapy dog who has cheered spirits in frail care units and at mental health facilities. He’s added ‘dancing’ to his skills and entertains his audience by showing off his moves to music.

“Knowing that the dogs are coming is what gets some people out of bed,” says Genine. “If I end up in frail care, unable to have my pets, I’d love it if dogs came to visit.”

It’s not just the aged or the lonely that find solace in their company. Therapy dogs have occasionally been brought into children’s courts to reassure a child who has to be questioned, and they are being used in many countries to help children who have reading difficulties.

In 1999, the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) programme was launched in the USA and soon spread far and wide. Known as Lees – Ukufunda – READ in South Africa, it helps improve children’s reading and communication skills by offering a therapy animal and volunteer as reading companions to children in schools and libraries.

“Animals don’t judge,” says Marieanna le Roux.



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DID YOU KNOW?

- Search and rescue (SAR) dogs have been used for over 300 years. The first, St Bernards, were trained to find travellers lost in deep snow in the Swiss and Italian mountain passes. It is estimated that a single SAR dog can accomplish the work of 20 to 30 human searchers.
- In a 2015 UK National Health Service (NHS) preliminary study, trained dogs were able to detect prostate cancer nine out of 10 times, making them more accurate than the standard Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) screening test, which has a high ‘false positive’ rate.
- In Tanzania and Mozambique, the African giant pouched rat has been trained to sniff out tuberculosis, one of the world’s most deadly infectious diseases. According to CBC News, the rats can screen 100 sputum samples in just 20 minutes.

FIND OUT MORE

● **South African Riding for the Disabled Association (SARDA) has branches in Cape Town, Durban, George, Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg. The interaction between horses and riders provides physical as well as psycho-social benefits, building strength, confidence and a sense of achievement. www.sardacapetown.co.za**

● **For Pets as Therapy (PAT) area coordinators and more about the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) programme, visit www.pat.org.za. If you’re in Gauteng, visit www.therapytopdogs.co.za.**



Above: Janet Harding and her service dog, Gus, who monitors her sugar levels; Far left: Gordon the pug and friends visiting the elderly; Left: Gus, collecting for Plett Animal Welfare Service.

“They just offer unconditional love, which makes it so much easier for the child to relax.” By association, children learn to love books and see reading as pleasurable. There are now thousands of READ teams around the world, making a difference, one child and one dog at a time.

In a creative twist last year, school children were invited to read to rescue animals at a Hout Bay Domestic Animal Rescue Group (DARG) shelter. The images brought a lump to the throat: when love and trust flow between animal and human, there is powerful therapy for both – and for all who witness it. **J**