

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

Anxiety, depression and other mental health issues can have a devastating effect on our sense of wellbeing. Dogs, horses and other animals are proving to be not just sources of great comfort and support, they are also saving lives.

Words by **Joanna Tovia**

Holly* was just 12 when she first attempted suicide. Her uncle had been abusing her regularly since she was 10, she suffered violence at the hands of her stepfather and her mother provided little support. Holly ended up in hospital after her first suicide attempt but when her mother came to see her in the emergency room, it was not to offer the comfort and attention Holly so badly needed, but to scream at her in anger.

“Then she left and never came back,” Holly says. When she was ready to be discharged two weeks later, the hospital couldn’t find anyone willing to take her. “The nurses tried my father but he didn’t want me; they tried my grandparents but they didn’t want me; they tried my mother many, many times but she refused to come and get me. So I ended up in state care.”

Unbelievably, her first foster home was an abusive one, run by an alcoholic “carer” who would lock the foster children in their rooms and not let them out. “We had to pee on the carpet in the corner,” Holly says.

Her uncle continued to rape her during visitations, and she endured other physical and sexual assaults at the hands of foster families. “I had one good foster home – that lady was wonderful and took good care of me and helped me a lot, but most of them were pretty horrific. If it wasn’t being abused by the carers, it was being abused by the other children, often older than me.”

Holly ran away and would often live on the streets in between foster homes.

“There was a lot of fending for myself, finding shelter, food, safety, somewhere to sleep at night,” she says.

HELPING HOUNDS

The eloquent 29-year-old I meet has come a long way from the dark days of her childhood, but Holly now suffers from debilitating anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and the highs and lows that come with being bipolar.

At 16, when Holly first moved into a flat of her own, her psychiatrist suggested she get a dog to give her a reason to get up every day. She hasn’t been without a dog since, and now has a trained psychiatric assistance dog called Ricardo*.

“My dog has been the only reason I

haven’t killed myself many, many times,” Holly says. “I get the most black, dark, deep suicidal depressive episodes. They are hell. I would not wish them on anyone, not even my uncle. The only thing that stops me from killing myself is my dog.”

Aware Dogs is a non-profit training organisation whose founder, Che Forest, was instrumental in getting mental health

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assistance dogs granted the same rights as guide dogs. With their help, Holly has trained Ricardo to provide the support she needs to live a more normal life.

“With Ricardo’s help, I no longer need someone to come with me to go to the supermarket, the chemist, the doctor, to catch the train. These things are big things for me and Ricardo makes them possible.”

He doesn’t get the “compassion fatigue” she sees in human carers and the Italian greyhound has been trained to interrupt panic attacks before they escalate by mouthing at her hands, licking her and leading her to safety.

“It’s a very insistent lick, like I’m covered in sugar or something and he has to get it off me. It’s very distinct from just being affectionate.” Ricardo will negotiate crowds so she can close her eyes or look at the floor while he leads her somewhere she feels safe, then lies against her chest until she can calm down enough to remember to breathe and focus on some of the coping mechanisms she’s learned through therapy.

“When you’re in that hyper-aroused, panicky state the last thing you remember is what you were taught in therapy,” she says. “He will just lie there and lick my face and I’ll match my breathing with his and

that’s enough for me to get through a panic attack without it becoming full-blown.”

Ricardo can also identify the rituals that signify that Holly is about to cut herself. He will whine, jump and paw at her legs to make her sit down. “He will then lie in my arms and stay there until the urge has passed.” And when she enters the downward spiral of a depressive episode, he

will snuggle up with her in bed for a couple of days before dragging clothes over to the bed to let her know it’s time to get up.

Holly and Ricardo have been working together for seven years now. She has stopped using drugs and alcohol as an escape and has reduced her anxiety medication. “I know he’s got my back. It’s more effective for me to use my dog than it is for me to pop a pill and wait the 15 minutes for it to work ... It’s amazing what my little guy can do.” Holly now volunteers as an Aware dog trainer to help others facing similar challenges.

As well as providing companionship and a safe, grounding presence, one of the best things about having an assistance dog, according to Aware founder Forest, is the increased social interaction that comes with it. People smile at dog owners more and stop to talk, Forest says, and this alone can reduce the sense of isolation so common in people suffering from depression or anxiety.

“Anxiety is frightening and some people can feel so alone that it’s just too intense to confront the world ... A dog can be your partner; it’s about feeling safer because you’re not alone.”

Aware helps people who want to train their own dogs as assistance dogs, a process



that can take two years. To qualify for a mental health assistance dog, a person needs to have a diagnosed impairment verified by a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist. Forest says dogs and their owners must already show a close bond and the ability to communicate before Aware will take them on for training.

HEALING HORSES

Dogs and other animals such as guinea pigs, rabbits, horses and even dolphins, are being used in therapy sessions with great success. Studies report reduced levels of anxiety and improved communication between therapist and patient when an animal is present, partly because the focus is on the animal and not solely on the patient.

Horses are being recognised for their therapeutic value thanks to their uncanny ability to reflect what humans are feeling. Colin Emonson has been pairing troubled horses with troubled humans through his Horses for Hope programme in Victoria, Australia, since discovering that natural horsemanship can help people with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress to better regulate their emotions.

Using a process called equine-assisted narrative practice, Emonson helps people rethink the limiting labels they have given themselves or have been given. He works with a client and horse to help them find ways to reach a calm state – skills they can take away and apply to their lives.

“When it comes to mental illness, we make no claim to cure,” Emonson says. Instead, the programme enables people to better manage mental health issues. “If they can take better control of themselves, they can then start to do things they might have otherwise not been able to do.”

Clients are paired with horses that have experienced their own trauma at the hands of humans and so are more cautious of newcomers as a result. Horses can smell adrenalin, hear our heart beating from five metres away and monitor our breathing. They know instantly how tense or relaxed we are and reflect how we’re feeling through their own behaviour.

“If you put a horse and person in a yard and put a heart rate monitor on both, within moments the horse’s heart rate will match the person’s,” Emonson says.

Emonson guides clients to use their energy

to either draw a horse closer or gently send it away. Clients are often surprised at their capacity to control their emotions.

“That opens up conversations that weren’t possible before – those conversations are coming from a different place because they are a slightly different person than they thought they were.”

When someone feels calm and in control of their emotions, a horse will naturally approach them and lower its head, just as it would in the presence of a calm, assertive herd leader they would turn to for guidance and protection.

When Louise O’Brien first entered the Horses for Hope yard with Emonson and a flighty horse, she felt depressed and disconnected. She had been in therapy for more than 30 years, but says her distrust of people meant she made little progress.

“When I get depressed I shut down and find it impossible to communicate,” she says. “All I want to do is shut out the whole world and hibernate.”

In the horse yard, calming down was not what she had trouble with – she found it harder to project the assertive energy required to get a horse to trot around the yard. “The most difficult part for me was to bring my energy up, because in my mind I had linked this with aggression,” O’Brien says. “This work with the horse demonstrated to me how some people in my life were unintentionally pushing and pulling me around.”

This revelation has transformed how she sees herself in the world – she no longer thinks of her sensitivity as a negative.

“Somewhere along the line I had taught myself that to disconnect from the human race was a safer alternative than to face the trauma that I held inside,” she says.

“I am not ashamed to say I am 48. What is the shame is it has taken this long for me to be able to work with a therapy that has so profoundly bridged this glaring disconnect that was in my life.”

Visit horsesforhope.org.au or awaredogs.org.au to find out more and make a donation.



MINDFOOD.COM

Go online to mindfood.com to read about how dogs are being used for therapeutic treatment in prisons.

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PETS AS THERAPY

Next time you find yourself resenting having to vacuum fur off the sofa, take a breath and remind yourself how much better your pet makes you feel just by being around. Pets are known to have a major impact on our mental health and can be invaluable if we are going through hard times.

The Black Dog Institute reports that one in five Australians will suffer from mental illness such as depression or anxiety in any year, and 65 per cent don’t access treatment. The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand reports that one in five New Zealanders will suffer from mental illness such as depression or anxiety in any year, with about 60 per cent not accessing treatment.

While seeing a professional can be beneficial, turning to your pet for solace can also be helpful. Exercise has been shown to alleviate signs of depression, but having to take the dog for a walk provides an added incentive to get moving. Simply stroking an animal’s soft fur can also be soothing when we’re upset – studies have found measurable increases in feel-good brain chemicals after positive interaction with an animal, whether it be a dog, cat, cow or dolphin.

According to the Australian Companion Animal Council, pets provide companionship, give pleasure, increase social interaction and improve self-esteem. A pet can also reduce blood pressure in its owner and pet owners are known to deal better with stressful situations and use less medication than non-owners.