

CHAPTER
7

The Benefits of the
Human-Animal Relationship

Steve Peterson



Photo courtesy of Maria Napoli

*When I look into the eyes of my dog
I smile from deep in my heart
See a glimpse of my soul
And feel unconditional love*

Maria Napoli



It's not a mystery that humans have a special, deeply-rooted and powerful emotional bond with their pets. Anyone who has ever had a pet knows that kindredship and love is often similar to that of a family member, because that animal has become an emotional extension of one's daily life and well-being. Those of us who have ever petted a kitten or held a puppy and smelled "puppy breath" can profess that *feel-good* emotion that often floods over us. One may notice a smile that frequently uncontrollably appears from ear-to-ear and the sparkle that lights up the eyes. It is hard to duplicate, or articulate, that certain feeling.



The American Veterinary Medical Association recognizes that "the human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both." Inclusive of this are the psychological, emotional, and physical interactions among people, animals and their collective environments.¹

In this chapter we are going to explore beyond the anecdotal and delve into the science of this emotional and physiological bond that humans and animals share; it is this relationship that provides us benefits that are sometimes beyond immediate comprehension and are not always overt in their appearance.

The Sensation of Touch



The initial and most common perception of a human-animal interaction is physical contact: touching, holding, and petting. This is evident in a structured environment that promotes initial interaction between people and animals, such as a petting zoo or an interactive "touch tank" at a sea life aquarium. The tactile element establishes the necessary bond that visual contact alone fails to carry.²

There is supportive evidence that the amygdala, the integrative center of the brain where emotion and emotional behavior live, become active beyond simple visual stimulation when touch is introduced. Emotion is activated when the sensation of touch is associated with the visual input.³ Perhaps this is why we have this innate desire to touch something that we perceive as pleasurable such as petting a kitten or holding a puppy. This also holds true for tactile learning⁴, which can be correlated with this need to touch an animal as a pleasure-seeking imprint within the brain.

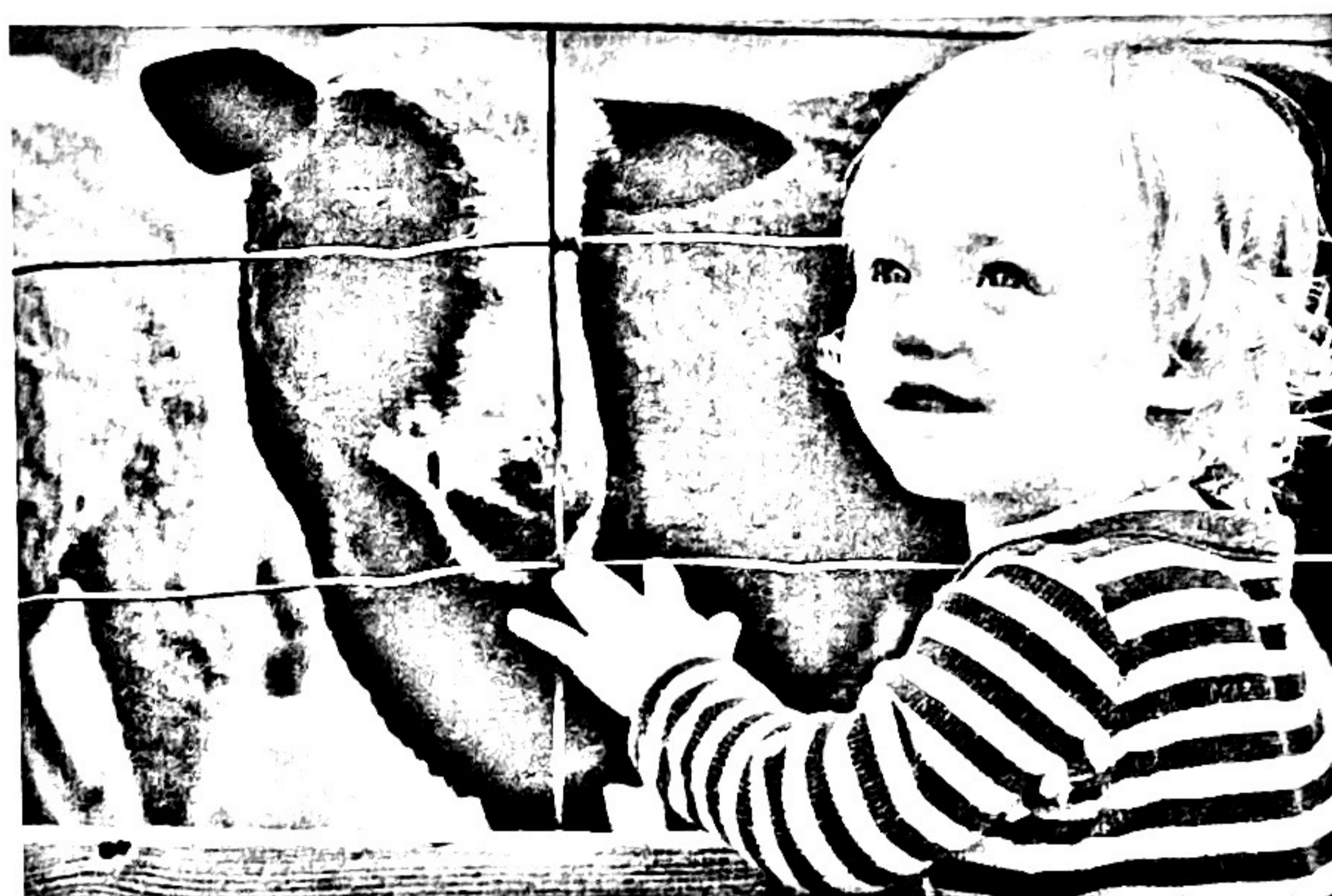


The neurohormone (combination neurotransmitter and hormone) oxytocin plays an important part in the desire to hold and cuddle with an animal; often referred to as the "cuddle

drug,” this short-acting chemical release in the body makes us crave physical contact and strengthens close relationships.⁵ Oxytocin’s role in human relationships is well-documented, but it clearly carries the same role in the human-animal dynamic.

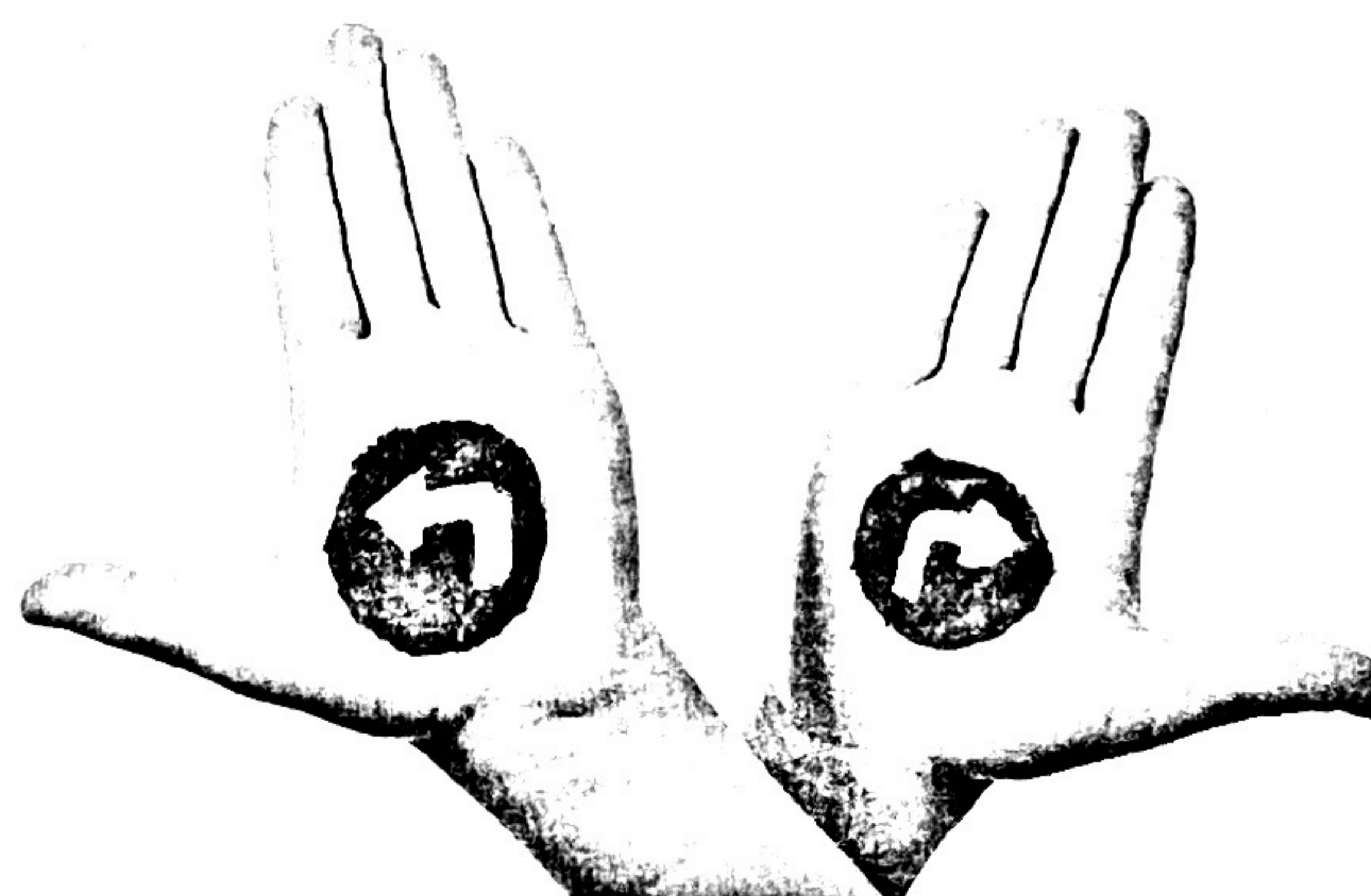
Emotional Engagement of the Parasympathetic Nervous System

As discussed in previous chapters but worth mentioning again, the body’s physiological reaction to anxiety and stressful situations is to go into “fight or flight mode.” This is the sympathetic nervous system response. Adrenalin and cortisol flood the organs and tissues, heart rate increases, the mind disengages, and the brain directs the body to go into self-preservation mode. The root of the word sympathetic is *sympathy*. Of Greek origin, the word sympathy means “to suffer.”⁶ Effectively, that is what your body is enduring or preparing to endure during highly anxious or stressful times.



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Opposite of this stress response is the healthy and relaxed state that occurs during engagement of the parasympathetic nervous system. Harmful chemicals released due to perceived imminent danger are replaced with endorphins, dopamine, oxytocin, etc. The prefix of the word parasympathetic is *para*. Of French origin, this prefix means “to prepare against” or “ward off.”⁷



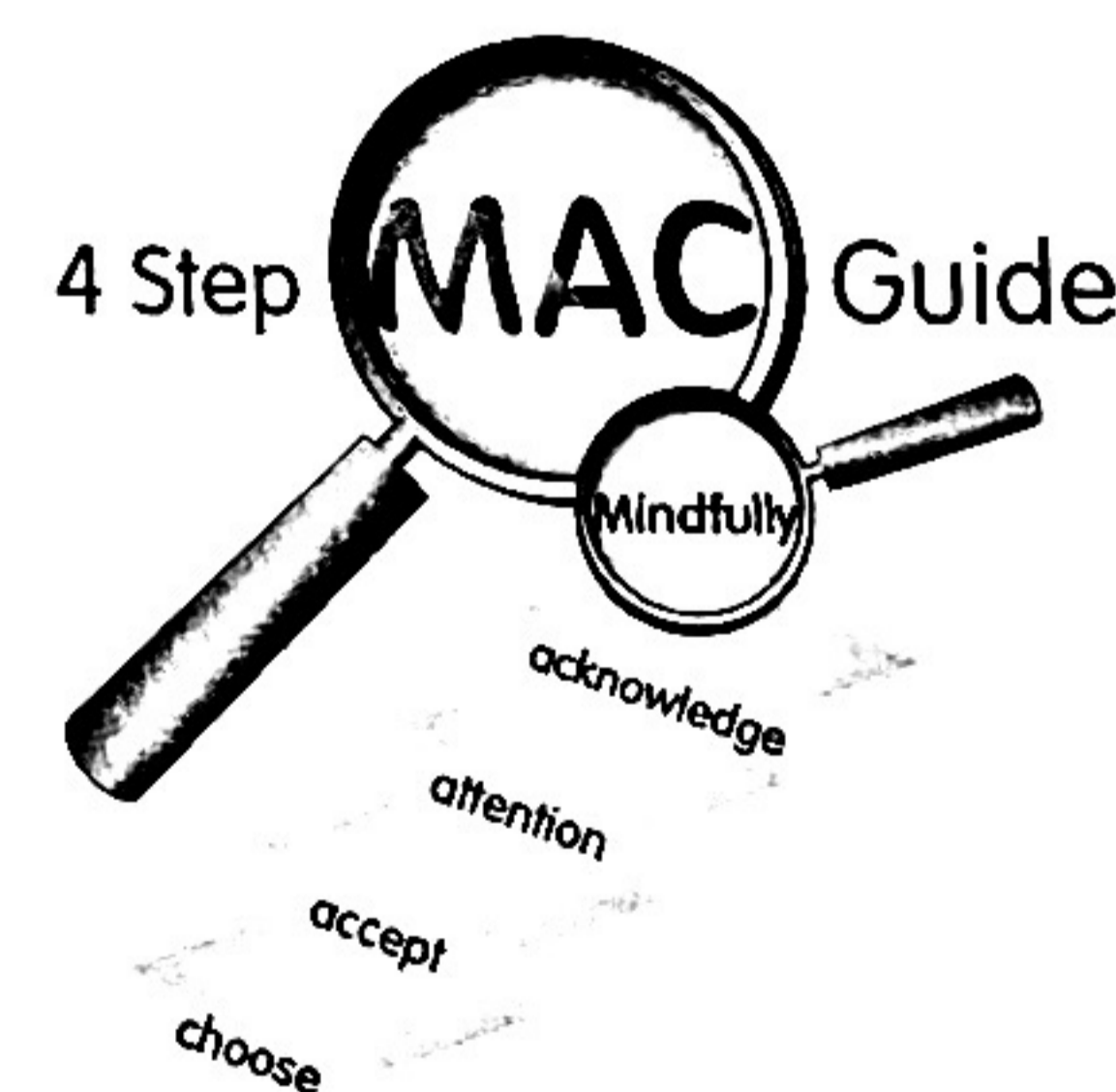
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The human body cannot be in both sympathetic and parasympathetic response modes at the same time. Engagement of one disengages the other, as they stem from separate antagonistic (inhibits physiological action of another) sets of nerves.⁸

Disengaging the body’s sympathetic nervous system response and engaging the parasympathetic response is the fundamental component of stress management.

Interaction with an animal, be it a pet or at a petting zoo, through an animal-assisted activity or a structured therapeutic intervention, stimulates a *positive emotional state*. Animals make us smile, make us happy, and help take our minds off of things. This in itself is activation of the parasympathetic nervous system response.

Animal interaction is also mindful...*very* mindful. It is this mindfulness, this focused attention and absolute concentration on the animal that elicits a positive emotional response. (Unless, of course, you are holding a snake and you have a fear of snakes.)



Children and Adolescents Raised With Pets

The positive feelings a child has about their immediate environment contributes to the development of their confidence and self-esteem. Such self-efficacy can be a factor for the construct of trusting relationships with others as the child grows. A positive relationship with a pet can be a foundation for the development of future healthy relationships.⁹ Pet ownership and interaction with domestic animals in general not only provides the child with a connection to an element of nature, but also helps foster such developmental and cognitive skills as:¹⁰



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- Respect for living things.
- Development of responsible behavior as a care-giver.
- Nurturing skills and empathy.
- Life lessons of birth, illness, death, and bereavement.
- Enhanced non-verbal communication.

Emotional needs can also be fulfilled as a child is often exposed to physical and psychological comfort provided by contact with the pet, as well as experiencing love, loyalty, and affection. For some children, the pet can provide a means of sharing “thoughts and secrets” in the same way a child may speak to and confide in a stuffed animal.

Prosocial behaviors, an important component of a child’s development, can be enhanced through bonding and interaction with pets,¹¹ as there is positive and nonjudgmental affection. Studies also suggest that the introduction of a pet into the home of an autistic child can help with their socio-emotional development and prosocial behaviors.¹²

Family ownership of a pet can also improve at-home relationships because of increased time interacting and involving the animal as well as the inclusion of pet-centered activities. These increased interactions and activities promote a sense of “family harmony”¹³ and connectivity between family members.

The teenage years, arguably the most challenging not only for the adolescent but also for the families themselves, are a period of identity struggle wedged in between being a child and becoming an adult. Adolescents are expected to make their own decisions, yet still have to ask permission. At a period in their lives when they may feel unloved, unaccepted, misunderstood, and at odds with the world, a pet can help provide that unconditional love, environmental stability, and emotional support.¹⁴ Inability to clearly express emotionally-driven thoughts and coming to terms with complex and confusing feelings without an emotional outburst can be challenging at this age. Animal interaction, and even animal-assistive therapies, can help develop self-control, personal decision-making¹⁵, and communication as their attention is redirected and focused on a specific, interactive, and engaging task.

Establishing healthy relationships and, perhaps, even mending existing ones can be promoted by the uncomplicated and unconditional love an adolescent experiences from a pet. By learning that it is “ok” to express feelings and emotions with a pet without any backlash or repercussion can provide not only an

outlet for the teen but also nurture healthy relationships with friends, family, and loved ones.¹⁶ During times when teens feel alone and depressed, a pet can provide that missing companionship.

Adults, Young and Old, Benefit from the Human-Animal Relationship

For many adults and senior citizens, having a pet as a companion can provide not only medical benefits but also provide a level of social interaction and exercise. Pets are often viewed as a member of the family, sometimes taking the role of a child who has grown and moved out or filling the role of a deceased partner. Studies indicate that the companionship of a pet can improve the quality of life of cardiac patients by aiding in the reduction of blood pressure and assisting in recovery after a heart attack.¹⁷ For the elderly specifically, having a pet at home has been correlated to improved overall health and self-reported well-being.¹⁸



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Emotional needs of an adult can also be fulfilled by a pet (love, loyalty and affection), as well as serve as a coping mechanism during stressful life events such as a divorce or during a time of death.¹⁹

Pet ownership, specifically that of a dog, can also increase a person's (both young and old) level of exercise. Many dogs require walks outdoors, which in turn provides a routine level of exercise for their owner. One study stated that the level of exercise of a dog owner "increased significantly,"²⁰ suggesting that canine pets have a marked impact on a sedentary lifestyle for adults of all ages. As routine exercise can be a challenge for the elderly adult, having a dog that requires outdoor activity can be exceptionally beneficial. Pets who are regularly taken outdoors often facilitate social interactions between people, leading to increased psychological health.²¹ Hence, animal ownership can also improve human relationships.

Animals as Companions...Animals as Therapy

There is a long history behind therapeutic use of animals. In the early Egyptian city of Cynopolis (City of Dogs), it was believed that if the affected area or injury were licked by a dog the individual would have a more rapid healing process or even full recovery. This practice was carried over by the Greeks.²²

Florence Nightingale suggested that animals possessed a valuable role in adjunctive medical treatment century by writing in the late 19th: "A small pet animal is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially. A pet bird in a cage is sometimes the only pleasure of an invalid confined for years to the same room."²³



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Animal-assisted interventions were present in early psychological and educational fields as well. By measuring direct physiological responses, ecologist Alan Beck and psychiatrist Aaron Katcher demonstrated a decrease in human sympathetic nervous system activity through simple interaction with a friendly dog.²⁴ Sigmund Freud discovered an improved outcome in his therapy sessions with children and adolescents when his dog, Jofi, was present during psychotherapy sessions.²⁵ John Locke in the late 1600s suggested that pet animals were conducive to childhood development and association in learning.²²

Understanding the bond between humans and animals, and properly nurturing that bond, has opened many avenues to helping us integrate pets/animals for therapeutic, health and wellness purposes. This can be a tacit animal presence such

as a house pet that provides comfort to someone at home, or more explicit and structured such as a guided interaction between a trained animal and a patient/client.

Animal-assisted interventions (animal-assisted therapies and animal-assisted activities) are a rapidly growing modality in the healthcare and educational settings. At present these interventions are considered promising complementary practices. Due to the growing alternative health movement within the established medical community, more attention is being given to these practices to identify their efficacy and validity.

Animal-assisted interventions can take the form of either Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) or Animal-Assisted Therapies (AAT). Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) are casual activities where an animal, its handler and an individual or group of individuals interact for comfort or recreational purposes. These activities hold minimal structure and tend not to involve patients or a formal healthcare practitioner. Animal-Assisted Therapies (AAT), conversely, are more of a structured encounter, led by a professional, involve patients/clients and are interventional to help reach specific goals in treatment.²⁶ Boris Levinson is widely considered the father of AAT, first demonstrating the social-behavioral benefits of animal therapy with children.²⁷

Each modality relies upon, and nurtures, the human/animal bond. Dogs, cats, and horses are the most commonly used animals in Animal-Assisted Therapy. The specific type of animal utilized varies, depending on the patient's treatment plan and specific therapeutic goals to be reached.

Animal-Assisted Therapy can be employed to promote recovery and coping skills for those with health problems such as cancer, heart disease, and mental health disorders. These therapies can also significantly reduce depression, pain, anxiety and fatigue associated these disorders.²⁸

Specifically, this therapeutic approach is intended to enhance physical, emotional, cognitive, and social function (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2013). Some examples are²⁹:

- Improve fine motor skills.
- Increase self-esteem.
- Decrease anxiety.
- Develop social skills.
- Provide palliative care for patients undergoing chemotherapy.
- Aid long-term care facility residents.
- Assist Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Assist stroke victims and physical therapy patients.
- Assist mental health patients.

ACTIVITY: YOUR FAVORITE PET OR AN ANIMAL THAT YOU HAVE HAD EXPERIENCE WITH

"It often happens that a man is more humanely related to a cat or dog than to any human being."

—Henry David Thoreau³⁰

What was the name of your favorite pet? Or an animal you have had experience with?

What kind of animal was it?

List five things about this animal that made you happy:

1.

 2.

 3.

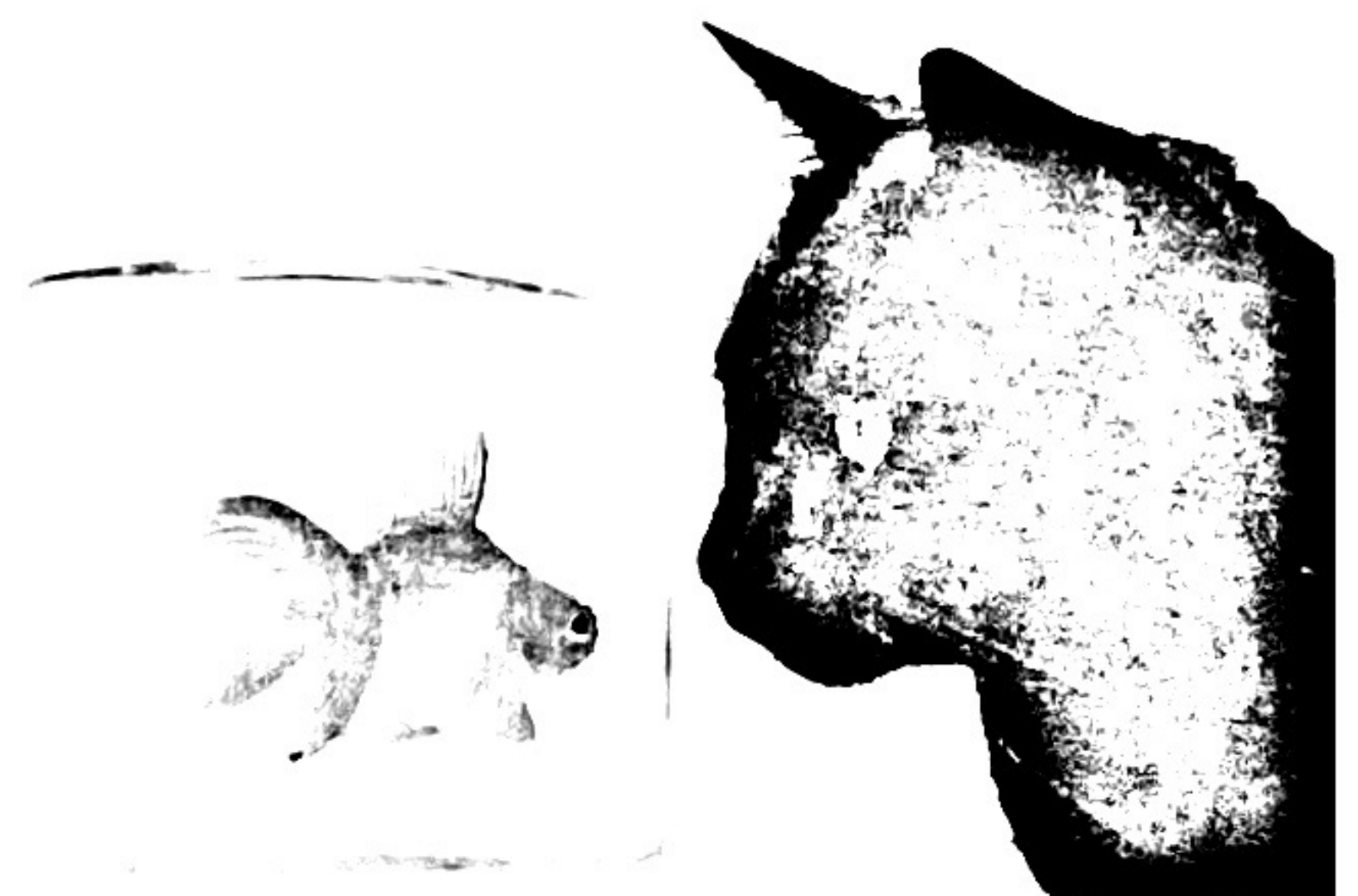
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Predator or Prey: Differences in the Construct of the Human-Animal Relationship

All animals (humans included) are identified as either predators or prey through evolutionary and social-behavioral characteristics. It is a wide-held belief that humans are predatory in nature based on our pre-historic ancestors; what makes this interesting, however, is that humans have demonstrated throughout history the advantages of *group living*. This demonstrates that we are, in fact, an evolved prey species.³¹ According to Michael Mountain (*Why Humans are So Bad at Being Predators*), "We are not true predators; we are, rather, a kind of empowered prey species."³¹



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The human predatory background evolved when tools, which eventually spurred the development of weapons, were utilized for survival. Species of prey live in groups as protection against predators, safety in numbers, if you will. Humans are social animals; our well-being and survival dependent upon our socialization skills. This distinction of predatory versus prey behavior in humans is important in understanding how the relational dynamic between humans and animals is built.

Dogs and cats, the most recognized domesticated pets, are predatory in nature. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) identifies the predatory nature of dogs and cats as the following:

Dogs

- Dogs are categorized as cursorial predators. Cursorial predators chase down their prey.
- Undomesticated dogs travel in packs. Unlike prey animals that group or herd for protection against a threat, dogs will pack in order to effectively attack as a compensatory measure for their relative small size.
- Predatory aggression is different from canine aggression. Predatory aggression is non-threatening. It is non-protective. This behavior relies upon stealth to attack, whereas canine aggression is protective and alarmist.

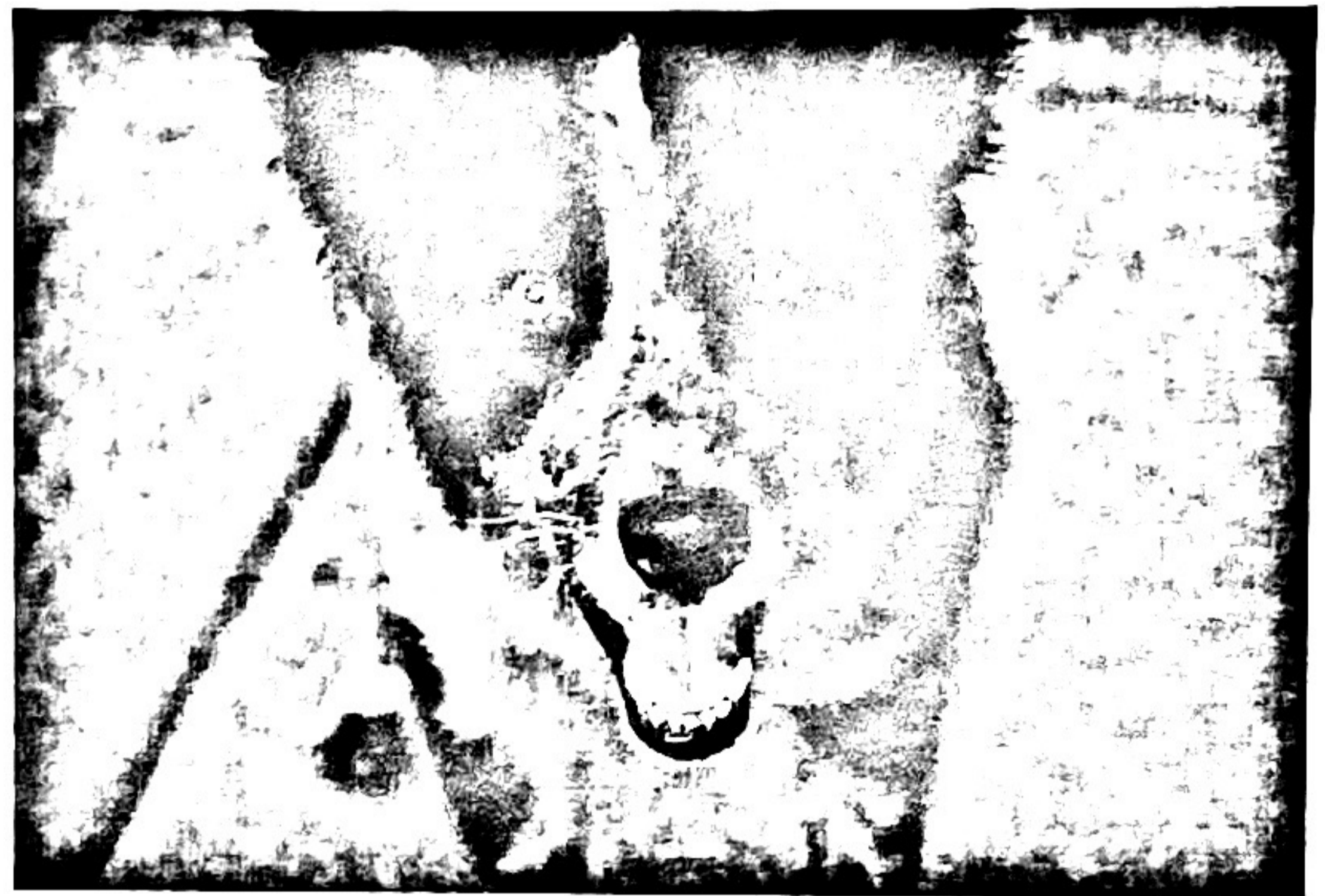
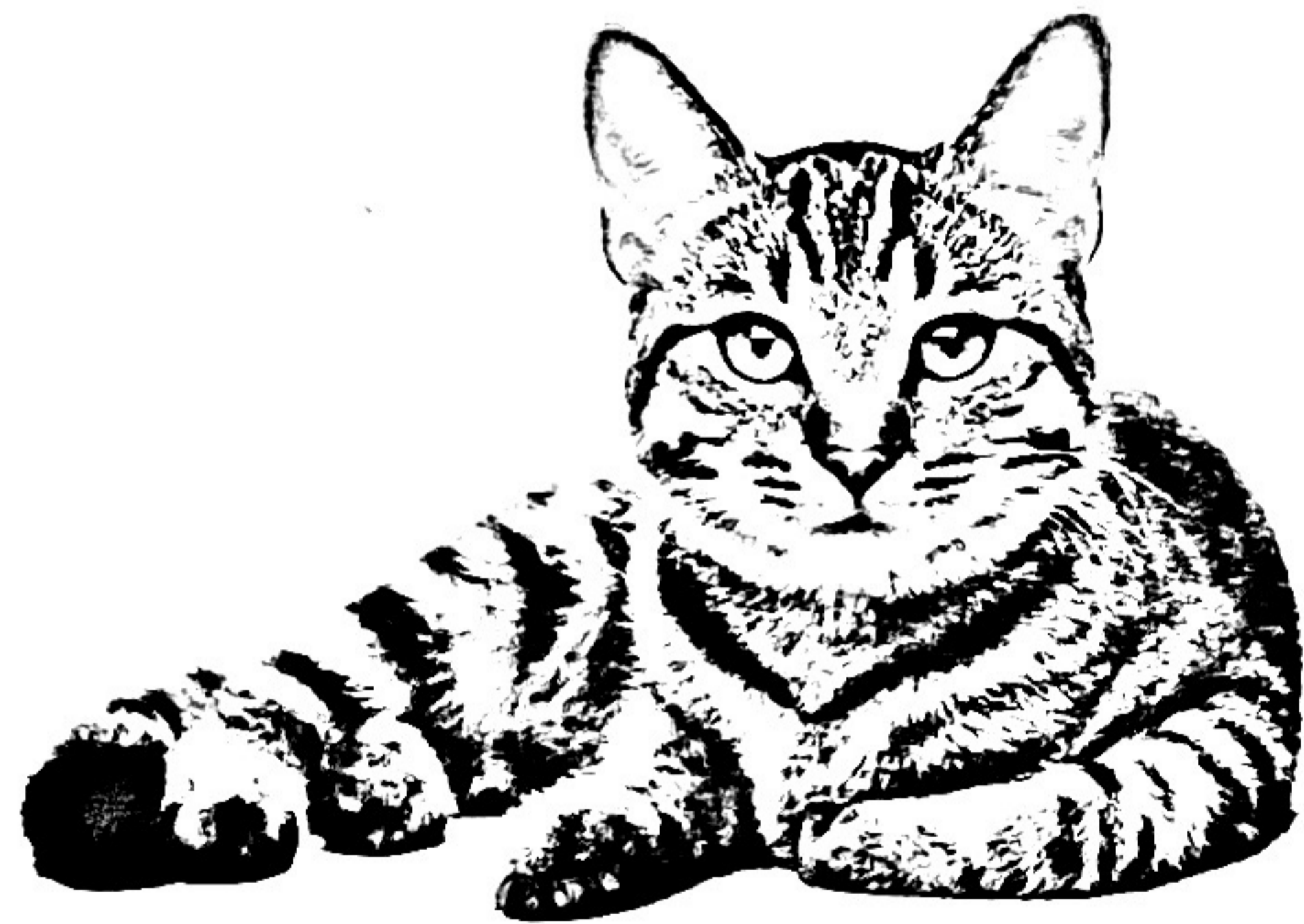


Photo courtesy of Maria Napoli

Cats

- Cats are either free-ranging (within the confines of a structured environment), feral (unsocialized), or stray (domesticated but displaced).
- Cats will explore, hunt, and scavenge for food.
- Household cats become restless and yearn for the outdoors when boredom sets in.



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Domestication of dogs and cats, through training and discipline, is designed to tether their predatory nature. However, domesticated pets cannot be de-programmed from their biological predatory nature.³² This does not mean dogs and cats are not excellent companions. Due to their predatory nature, either animal can travel and find its own food, water, and shelter; however, it is the presence of a human master that replaces the need to find their own food, water, and shelter. This is the bond that is created between us—literally that of provider-recipient. We provide not only the physiological necessities for the animal, but also the social component.

Dogs and cats demonstrate a level of reciprocity and show affection, loyalty and a protective nature of their home and provider. When that bond is violated (through abuse, neglect, or a predatory act), the

animal will begin demonstrating aggressive behavior and the reciprocity of affection, loyalty, and protection becomes withdrawn. With time, that animal can develop a fear and distrust of humans.

Horses also play a strong role in understanding the human-animal relationship. Unlike domesticated house pets, horses are unique in many respects. Yet the dynamic of their relationship with humans is unmistakable and very strong.

It is, however, comparatively less popular and their value to human health and well-being is not as well-documented or demonstrated; this is due, obviously, to not only financial and space considerations, but also to accessibility and availability to the common public in addition to the lack of strong research and empirically-supportive data. The strongest testaments of the strength and value of the human-equine relationship is historically anecdotal and compartmentalized.

A horse's natural behavior and reaction to its environment are unique in this context because they are prey animals; as such their initial response to events that pose a threat or are scary to them is *flight*.³³ This is substantially different from that of a dog or cat whose initial response to similar threats or fears would be to *fight*. These are the sympathetic nervous system differences between a predatory animal and an animal of prey. There are characteristics and social-behavioral traits unique to a horse compared to the common domesticated house pet.³³



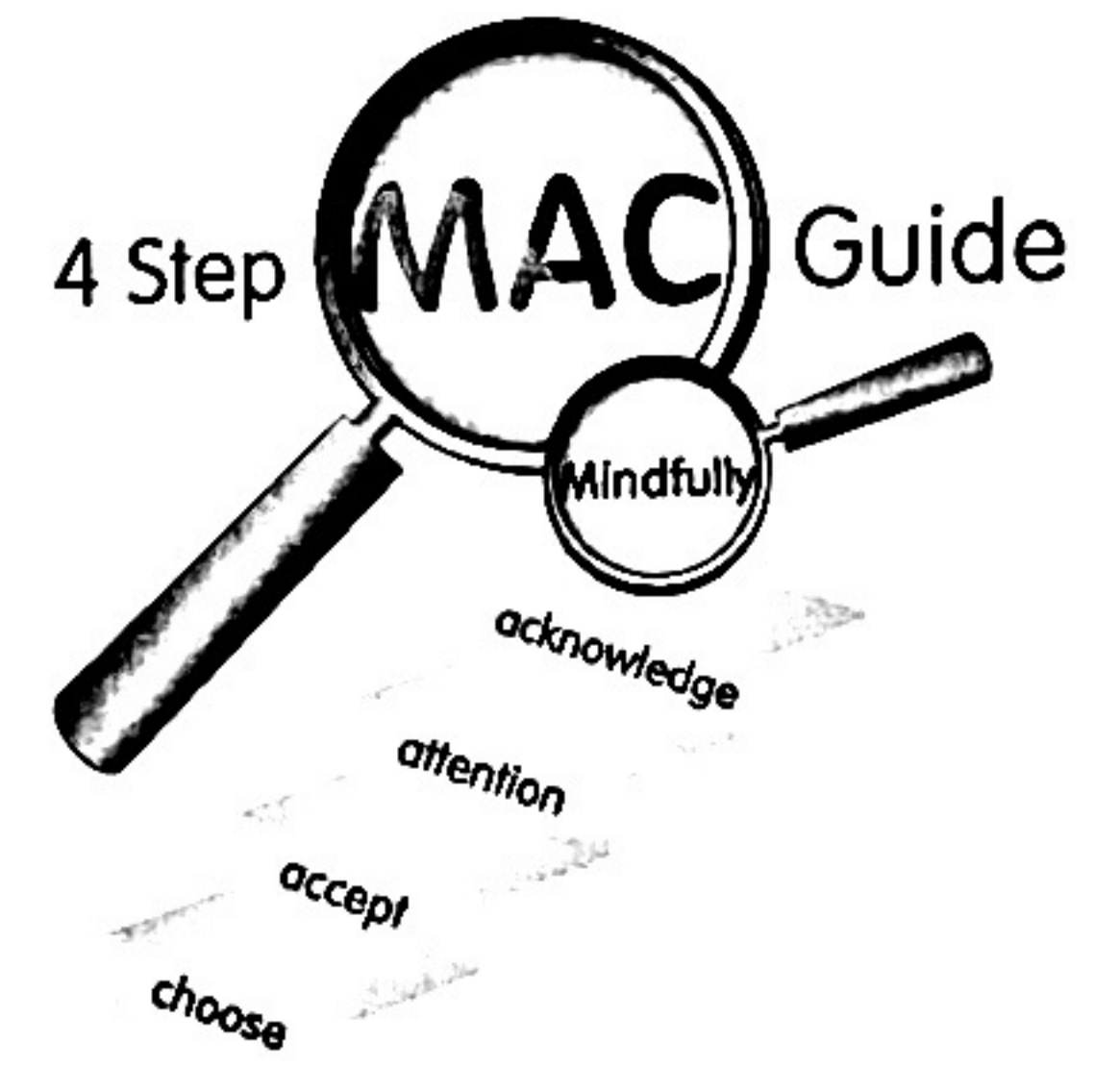
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- Horses rely on humans, solely, for food in a domesticated environment.
- Horses are cognizant of a human's physical approach to them based on the direction of our vision. Specifically if we look at them intensely and in the eye, the horse perceives this as a predatory approach.
- Horses are keenly aware of a predatory animal and will immediately feel threatened, or at very least, uncomfortable by that presence.
- Being a 1,000-pound animal, a human's initial approach to a horse is trepidation. We are larger and more capable of physically controlling a cat or dog; not a horse. The horse can sense this trepidation and may perceive it as a threat.
- Being prey animals, horses are incredibly social and rely heavily upon social companionship, but only from a non-predatory animal.
- A horse's behavior is reflective of the human emotion it is interacting with.
- A horse senses emotions and pheromones in humans and will react accordingly.³³
- A horse will react negatively toward a human's high energy level. Excitability and playfulness are not conducive to a horse's demeanor.³³

What makes horses unique companions is that their reliance upon human interaction is incredibly social and is learned through their perception of and comfort level with people, unlike the domesticated house pet's reciprocity for the provision of food, water, and shelter.

The "unconditional love" that a house pet may demonstrate even when we are having the worst of days and are in emotional turmoil is not how a horse will react. The horse will sense this "uneasiness" and will shy away.³³

When experiencing a mindful moment with an animal, one must give their intentional awareness of the present moment. Be fully in the present and practice these steps:



1. Acknowledge the moment being spent with the animal.
2. Pay full attention to the mannerisms, behaviors, and emotions shared by you and the animal.
3. Accept this moment without judgment, as the animal is not judging you nor should you judge your own feelings and emotions.
4. Choose to allow this moment to have a positive impact on you and the animal with which you are interacting.

ACTIVITY: MINDFUL INTERACTION WITH ANIMALS

*"Lots of people talk to animals...Not very many listen, though...
That's the problem."*

—Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh³⁴

How do you feel pets demonstrate mindfulness toward their owners? List some specific examples:

How can a pet owner reciprocate that mindfulness toward their pet?

Think about the last time you were mindfully engaged with an animal that was not your pet. What drew you to interact with that animal?

What was your mood/state of mind?

How did you feel afterward?

An Experiential Case Study of Equine-Assisted Activity and Therapy

ENVISION™ Equine Assisted Therapeutic Activities & Resource Center

A wonderful demonstration of the connection between the person and the animal would be an experience on a ranch with equine-assisted therapy. The purpose of this particular therapeutic intervention is to harness the unique power of the horse to foster a calm and relaxing environment for the client. These horses respond to clients who are frightened, defensive, angry, depressed, or who demonstrate a heightened sense of anxiety and help them reach a state of physical and psychological calmness which allows them to heal and learn.



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A powerful observation during this experience was how these horses appeared to be so “mindfully” aware of the emotional state that people were in. The level of engagement the horse had with people was a direct reflection of the level of emotion, or lack thereof, demonstrated by that person. As an example, when participating in a very logical, emotionless conversation outside of the horse stalls, the animals were noticeably absent; however, when the conversation became a dialogue involving an emotional topic and one of personal vulnerability, the horses appeared as if they were more at-ease with the human presence at that point. As it was explained by the Life Coach and Certified Equine Specialist, the horses sensed the human emotion and no longer felt as if there was a threat from the person. As animals of prey, they are attuned to an anxious, disconnected presence and may perceive that more of a threat than something that is welcomed.³⁵

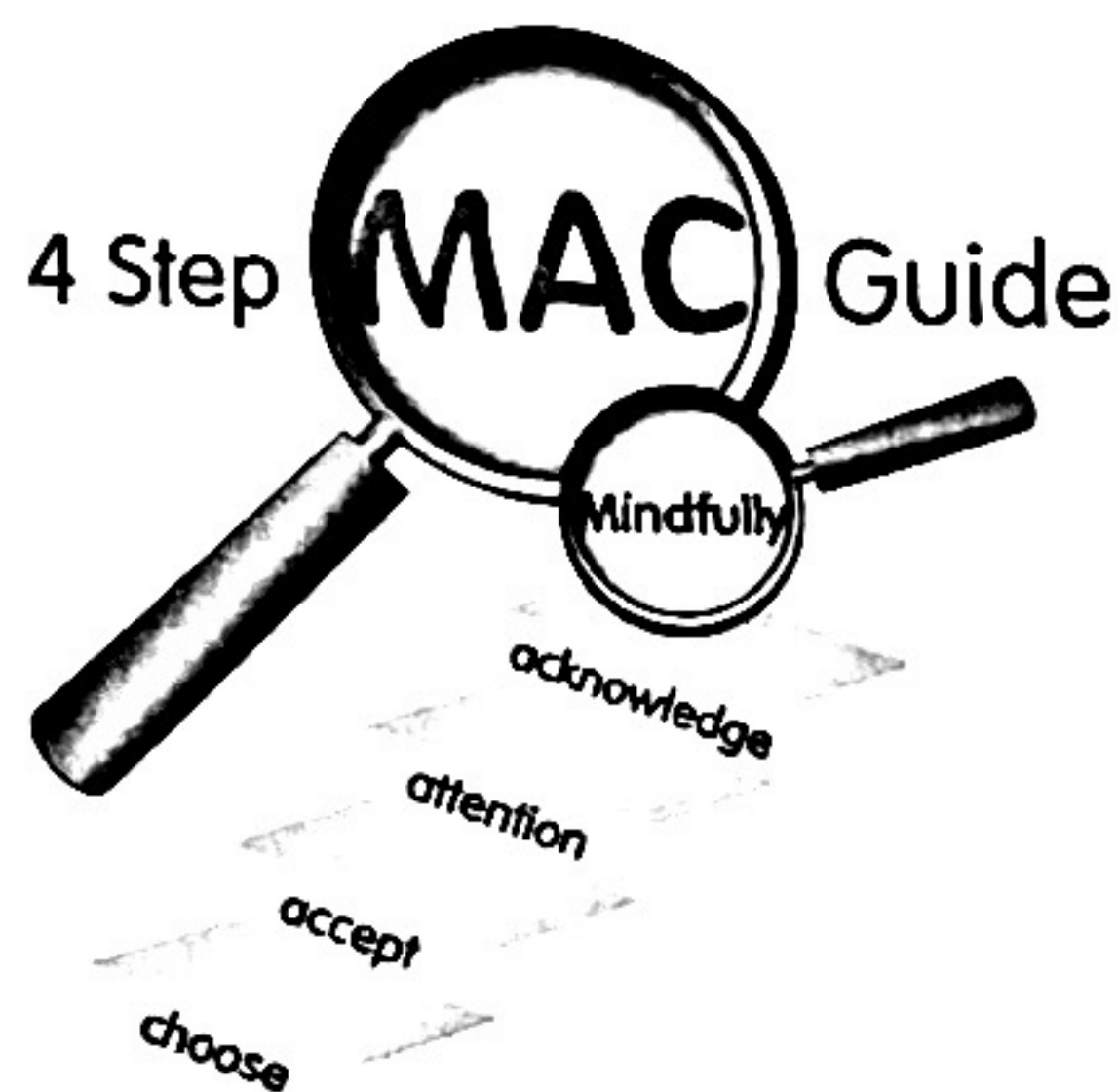
These horses would also demonstrate anxiety if the client they were working with was anxious. As the client was coached into a relaxed state and felt more comfortable being around the horse, the horse moved closer to the client and would actually begin nuzzling them. Such an incredible demonstration of the mindful connectivity between human and animal. The partnership observed between the horse and human relied heavily upon a relaxed, emotional connectivity so that the partnership could be built.

Unlike petting a dog or holding a cat, riding a horse implies a certain level of potential danger. There appeared to be a level of trust and vulnerability that had to be shared with the animal to put both the horse and rider at ease and foster that partnership.

ACTIVITY: ADOPTING A PET

"Whoever declared that love at first sight doesn't exist has never witnessed the purity of a puppy or looked deep into a puppy's eyes. If they did, their lives would change considerably."

—Elizabeth Parker, *Paw Prints in the Sand*³⁶



This activity will require you to visit a pet adoption event or center of some sort. While at this event or center please limit yourself to ten minutes of engagement with the animal. This is crucial because the purpose of this activity is to reach into your emotional responses, not your logical/cognitive analysis. When responding to the following questions, document your initial thoughts...the first things that come to your mind...write them down. Use very few words. Do not script or analyze your words. Pure emotional responses. Don't respond with what you think. Respond with what you FEEL.

Find a puppy. If you can hold this puppy, do. If not, then look into its eyes.

What do you feel?

What is the puppy feeling?

After your ten minutes has passed, leave the event or center.

Now...how do you feel?

Why Animals and Not People?

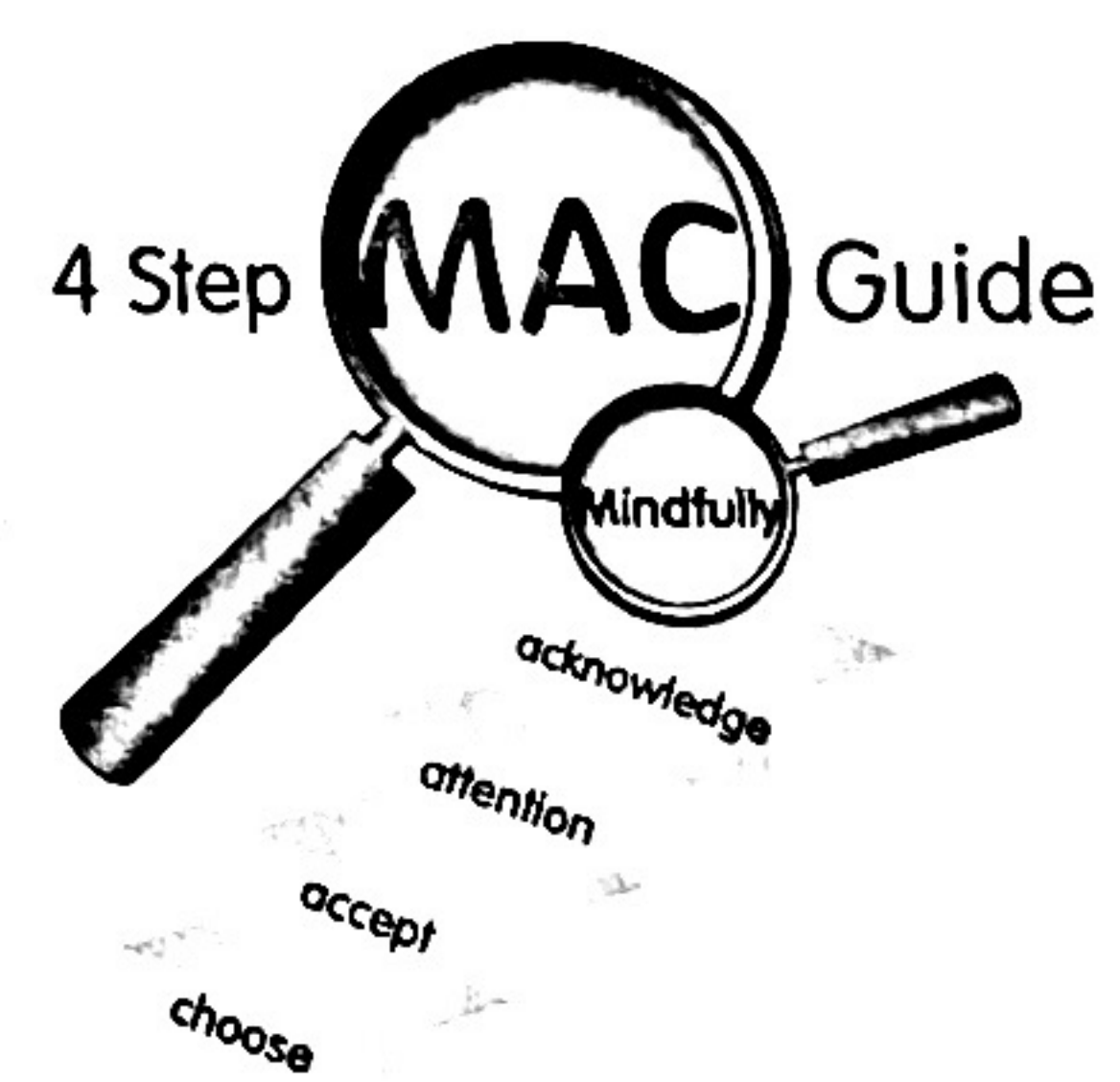
The human-animal relationship holds, at its cornerstone, engagement at a truly *mindful* level. This would include active mindfulness on behalf of the person and innate mindfulness on behalf of the animal. There is a mutually reciprocative, mindful engagement between humans and animals. A person seeks companionship, love, and satisfaction in caring for an animal. In exchange, the animal bonds with the person, satisfies that need for love and companionship, and relies upon the person to be taken care of. Neither human nor animal judge each other and they act upon each other's moods, mannerisms, and perceived situational needs. This is a level of intentional attention, emotional engagement, and non-verbal awareness that provides the mindfulness of their relationship.



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It is not being suggested that animals take the place of other people as a means to satisfy our social-behavioral construct or our need for bonding. Not at all. What is being suggested is that animals can fill voids, mental or social, that different people may have due to varying circumstances. Perhaps these are needs that are unable to be filled by another person. These voids can often be the need to self-reflect and respond to individual stressors in a very private, personal fashion or perhaps in another fashion that is unavailable for certain reasons.

Mindful engagement...building that human/animal bond...requires a level of vulnerability; a level of emotional vulnerability that often is difficult to share with another person. Animals do not judge people. People judge people. The human-animal dynamic carries within itself a strong level of nonjudgmental interaction. Animals provide a level of unconditional love, respect, and loyalty with very little required of their human counterpart. What animals do require is our mindful attention to the very basic of human and animal needs and instincts.



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