



Can animal interaction help develop resiliency and recovery?

by TAD COLES

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Petting a dog or cat feels great after a hard day at work, doesn't it? Helps you bounce back. Am I right? There's a good reason for that. The human-animal bond may be one of the best prescriptions for what ails many animal health workers.

Veterinary professionals need a lot of resilience. The American Psychological Association website says resilience is exemplified by adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. In a typical day of practice we may get exposed to each and every one of those more than once.

Remember *Tubthumping* by **Chumbawamba**?

"I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down!" That's the spirit! What if that's not quite enough? The lyrics go on, "He drinks a whisky drink, he drinks a vodka drink, he drinks a lager drink..."

Sounds like the veterinary school lesson I was taught about how to deal with hard times. Buck up and soldier on!

That method has been taught since around 400 BC when Hippocrates established objectivity and stoicism, AKA clinical distance, as a central tenet of professional medicine. Not a new idea! The problem is that method is ineffective for many veterinarians and may exacerbate fear, shame and isolation.

Personally, I need a lot of resilience and recovery. The word "resilience" has Latin origins meaning to spring back or rebound. I also need "recovery" or restoration to health from sickness. I've had to bounce back and recover from substance use disorder (SUD), compassion fatigue (CF), and burnout (BO), among other things. In an effort to decrease the stigma associated with these conditions I'm going to tell you a little about my path.

When I was a boy I injured my dog when trying to train her not to dash out the gate.

In my unskillful impatience I slammed the gate into her side. She yelped and limped. I felt awful, but her body language told me right away that she forgave me. By the next day she seemed fine.

Months later, when she developed a leiomyosarcoma in her spine, I asked the veterinarian why it happened.

"We really don't know, but sometimes trauma can trigger cancer," he said.

I told nobody, but I knew I had caused my dog's disease. The decision to become a veterinarian followed soon thereafter, as did my experimentation with marijuana, LSD, and alcohol. Guilt drove my bus to veterinary school and private practice, but I did not deal with that guilt, much less acknowledge it, until my first few years of recovery from SUD.

The human animal bond is a powerful healing force, but it's not all unicorns and bubbles. As with love of any kind, there will be negative emotions associated with the inevitable loss of the object of that love, especially if one makes a mistake and hastens that loss. We are human, so that means that we will all make mistakes no matter how hard we strive for perfection.

My childhood experience set me up for striving for perfection followed by suffering from shame. This dynamic duo, perfectionism and shame, sets the stage for CF and BO. I held myself to a high standard, was ashamed when I didn't achieve goals, held others to high standards as well, and worked hard to get them to perform better. I was sometimes difficult to get along with as a practice manager and owner.

My recovery from SUD while a solo practitioner was not easy. I had a lot of help. After a few years of SUD recovery I found I needed to sell my practice. In my case, CF manifested most prominently when I euthanized pets with children present. I suffered memory lapses.

I had an odd feeling when I saw the client at the grocery store.

"How's Fluffy doing?"

"You euthanized Fluffy last week, Doc."

I learned not to ask such questions when I had that odd feeling upon seeing a client. I often recalled the euthanasia as I walked away from the client. Apparently my brain protected me from the pain of remembering the event when in front of the client.

I had dreams about pets and clients. I took cases home with me, sometimes in my head, other times literally. I was anxious, on edge, and jumped at unexpected noise. In addition to having CF, which is acute and associated with a particular client or pet. I also had BO from too much to do and not enough time. I neglected my family. When I was with family and friends I often did not pay attention to those in front of me, instead I worried. I was in a nearly constant sympathetic, fight-or-flight, state. I did not recover from CF while still a practice owner; instead I sold the practice.

I wonder if I knew then what I know now about CF and BO if I would have been able to stay in practice full time. Since selling I've done relief work, technical service veterinary work for industry, worked as a medical writer, and most recently I've been consulting and coaching about SUD, CF, and BO.

I don't think that owning a dog or cat, petting it, caring for it, and receiving its love in return is the whole answer to developing resilience or recovery, but it sure helps. There is so much work involved in recovery. I had to establish a multitude of new routines to improve my physical and mental hygiene. But matching up the signs and symptoms of SUD, CF, and BO with the psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of the human-animal interaction (HAI) (*which is easier to quantify and validate compared to human-animal bond*) reveals some interesting observations, as described in a review paper by Beetz, et al.

Isolation is a feature of SUD, CF, and BO. We've all noted that HAI has a social catalyst effect. Best way to meet people? Take your dog for a walk in the park. According to studies cited by Beetz, et al. human smiles, sociability, helpfulness, responsiveness, and conversations occur more often when animals are present. And patients with SUD

get along better with their therapist when an animal is present.

Have you had a friend or relative in the midst of the disease of SUD? If so you'll know that one of the characteristics of folks with raging SUD is that they lie and do not trust others. Building trust is imperative. Students rate a psychotherapist who has a dog as more trustworthy. In fact, people in general are more trusting of others in the presence of a dog. Children in a classroom with a dog have more empathy.

Folks with SUD, CF, or BO are often depressed. Having a dog present reduces depression and improves people's mood. Elderly caring for a canary have reduced depression and improved quality of life.

Increased stress is a hallmark of BO and CF. Hence the rubber meets the road when we consider the anti-stress effects

of HAI. There are decreases in cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine when a pet is present. HAI is associated with decreased blood pressure, heart rate, and reactivity to stressors. With HAI there is increased heart rate variability, which is characteristic of being in a more relaxed, parasympathetic-tone state. With HAI there is reduced fear and anxiety, and in stressful situations, calmness is increased.

I believe that contact with pets, my own and those of friends and clients, made my recovery easier than it would have been without and will strengthen my resilience as I move forward. My belief is as much experiential as it is intellectual. All I have to do is feel fur in my fingers, look into those eyes, and see them squint when I hit just the right spot to confirm the importance of the human-animal bond to my mental and physical health.

*Beetz, Andrea, Kerstin Uvnäs-Moberg, Henri Julius, and Kurt Kotrschal. 2012. "Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin." *Frontiers in Psychology* 3: 234. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00234.*

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When he hurt so did I.

I've been deeply connected to animals for as long as I can remember. It didn't matter if they were stuffed (as in toys) or on TV (as in *Wild Kingdom*), in my backyard (wildlife) or my pets. I was attracted to their presence, their inability to communicate with words and their energy.

I wanted a dog for as long as I can remember but growing up my father was not having it so I had to wait until I became an adult to get my first dog.

I can still remember everything about the moment I met Virgil. I remember the breeders house, the room, the lighting and that little roly poly jumping bean that entered the room with all four feet going in a completely different direction. A 6 month old fawn pug with a spirit and joie de vivre that filled the room!

If animals are made for people then there's no doubt that this dog was made for ME. I loved him with the entirety of my being from Day 1. At the age of 30 I was born to be his mom.

He figured me out real quick. Don't want to be in your crate? Just whine. Want to be fed first thing in the a.m.? Scratch at the closet door. I cuddled his every whim and for the most part that made me love him even more, even when the 5 a.m. breakfasts eventually became 3 a.m. breakfasts.

On his first visit to the vet he was diagnosed

with a IV/VI heart murmur. I sobbed uncontrollably all the way home. The elation that I had been feeling quickly turned to an ache, a massive, deep ache in my heart. I finally got a dog and not just any dog but THE dog and now he was going to die.

Thankfully it turned out to be a septal defect and one that miraculously resolved. My husband and I believe we healed him with love. If it's possible, we did.

I was never so filled with joy than when I looked into his face and into those big, beautiful sea of brown eyes. I saw God when I looked at Virgil. And again I knew he was made just for me and me for him.

He had other challenges throughout the years including a nasty respiratory bout. We sought the advice of a specialist and found relief when we used a nebulizer with him. If I put a little smear of peanut butter in the mask he'd breathe those vapors forever. I loved helping him get better. I was a former tech so I had some skills! But my heart hurt too, especially when he coughed.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes Virgil got over that respiratory issue after some time. We bonded even more through those treatments. I think he felt special.

Then the unthinkable happened, we got another dog. A puppy. Another pug, this time only 4 months old. Before I got this puppy I brought Virgil to meet him. I wanted to make sure he would be ok with this new "brother", but I was really getting the puppy for me. I knew my bond with Virgil was intense and that someday I would lose him and I wanted to be "prepared". I said for many, many years that the day he died I'd probably have to be put in a straightjacket. Not to ruin the end of the story but that didn't happen, nor did it even come close.

For the first few months I didn't like the new puppy. Whenever I looked at Ernie I felt like I had betrayed Virgil. Again I felt sick inside, what have I done? Eventually that passed and Ernie became a big part of our family and a loyal friend to Virgil. Loyal right to the end.

I guess one of the reasons we bond so intensely with our pets is that they are always there for us. Virgil was always there for me, often when I wasn't there for myself. He loved me despite not loving myself and he showed me what unconditional love really is.

It was in fact during my 16 years with Virgil that I overcame drug dependency and my eating disorder and in his final months with me, I finally put aside alcohol. It was becoming clear that his purpose was to show me what was possible, and love me through it all. It was becoming clear that as his life was coming to an end, he had a mission to fulfill, one of leaving me better than when I met him.

What I'm most proud of is that when he was diagnosed with cancer at age 16 we spent his final months together mindfully. I was truly present with him in those months. Not resisting his diagnosis, wishing it were different but accepting it as it was and instead focusing my attention on just being with him. Holding him. Watching him sleep. Feeling his breath on my face. Looking into those big, beautiful sea of brown eyes and knowing in every cell of my body that the love we felt for each other would never die.

His presence in my life made me a much better person, able to love with an unconditional heart and become a person I am not only proud to be but was meant to be. And I have that little roly poly boy with the big, beautiful sea of brown eyes to thank for it. Thank you little boy.