Understanding empathy in association with Blue Cross

Introducing the human–companion animal bond and understanding the pet owner

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UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE HCAB IS

While people have studied animal behaviour for centuries, it is only during the past three decades that scientists have started to take more seriously the study of the emotional aspects of the HCAB. The relationship between human and pet can be simple and safe with minimal risk. Pets have qualities such as being openly affectionate, honest, loyal and consistent, providing a person with love and a feeling of self-worth, all contributing to the positive associations pet owners have with their pets.

The term 'attachment' can be used to measure human–companion animal relationships and these relationships share characteristics of traditional attachment theory. It is interesting to note that people who are more highly attached to their pets have been found to have fewer social networks and more negative life events, for example bereavement.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HCAB

The vast majority of owners consider their pets to be friends or family members. They are an important part of many of our lives and we cannot imagine life without them. Pets may serve certain roles for different individuals: a confidant, best friend, a link to a lost love one or a time and era. They may support us through some really challenging times in our lives such as divorces, bereavements, illness, or it could be that we are supporting them through illness too, strengthening the bond we have with them. The relationships owners have with their pets and the attachments formed are just as unique as the individuals involved.

EVALUATING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HCAB

The HCAB has been found to be beneficial in many contexts. Animals can be used therapeutically (animal-assisted interventions), for example, assistance and medical detection dogs. The social support provided by companion animals is important to elderly people who have lost friends and family, and/or have no children or employment to draw them into the community. Looking after animals and interacting with them has been shown to help alleviate feelings of loneliness and attachment to pets has been shown to reduce emotional distress associated with loneliness. A strong attachment to a pet in those with few human confidants has also been linked to less depression and loneliness.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain what the human–companion animal bond (HCAB) is
- Identify the characteristics of the HCAB
- Define the importance of the HCAB

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which group benefits the most from the HCAB?
(A) The elderly
(B) The homeless
(C) Children
(D) All of the above
2. Which of the following best describes the relationship that companion animals provide us with?
(A) Honest, loyal, consistent
(B) Unconditional, non-judgemental, unpredictable
(C) Loyal, openly affectionate, conditional
(D) Honest, consistent, unpredictable
3. Which of the following describes the bond, or attachment, a person has with their pet?
(A) The same as that of a human member of the family
(B) Greater than that of a human member of the family
(C) Less than that of a human member of the family
(D) All of the above

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