

## HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION: Can it prevent disease?

By: Sharon Langer

In the past 20 years there have been many studies conducted that measured the therapeutic value of human-animal interaction. A companion animal may reduce anxiety, loneliness, and depression and thus delay the onset, decrease severity, or even slow the progression of stress-related conditions. Pets can stimulate someone to exercise, provide social support, and can help someone socialize in a group setting. They can be our therapists as well as our companions. Pets have been shown to be a source of tactile comfort by increasing sensory stimulation while decreasing blood pressure and heart rate.

In 1990, the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction organizations was founded to gather together national associations and related organizations interested in advancing the understanding and appreciation of H-A interaction. This organization has been officially designated as a working partner of WHO-The World Health Organization.

The Waltham Center for Pet Nutrition, in England, gave a \$2 million grant to the Eunice Shriver national Institute of Child Health and Human Development to research further H-A interaction to specifically study on a larger scale how children perceive, relate to and think about animals and how pets in the home impact children's social and emotional development.

If you have read this far into this article, I suspect you are an animal lover who already understands the power they bring to the human condition. I find it interesting that this power is actually being scientifically tested, and the results should help those of us who work with and for animals to make our case to the rest of the community.