

Kneading Animals?

Healing More than Muscles

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“Kneading animals” is a play on words to serve as a reminder that having an animal as a pet may provide therapeutic support to the human need for companionship. Humans may also perform functions that are therapeutic to their animal companion needs. What type of functions, you ask? Massage therapy, of course!

Why Massage?

As more and more people are realizing the benefits of massage in their own healing and wellness, they are also realizing that their animal companions can also benefit from the therapeutic effects of massage and an improved quality of life. Massage is a holistic approach, which means that to create an environment for wellness and health, the whole animal must be considered. This includes the animal's mind, body and spirit. Massage is one of the oldest forms of healing known to man. The first known documentation of massage occurred in 2700 B.C., by the Chinese. In 1975, Jack Meagher, a physical therapist and massage therapist, who is known for bringing the art of sports massage to the national forefront in the United States, started working on horses. He is credited with formally bringing massage to the animal world in the U.S., and he is considered the father of equine sports massage.

Today, many of our animal companions benefit from massage therapy. The same techniques used in human massage may be applied safely and effectively to animals. Massage is used on horses, dogs, cats, elephants, and many other animals to provide physical therapy, emotional bonding, and as preventative care for the athlete and family companion alike. The healing function of massage therapy accelerates recovery from injury and contributes to the overall economy of the body and the body's ability to function efficiently and healthfully.

What is Massage Therapy?

Massage therapy is the manipulation of soft tissue (muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia) to achieve specific goals of drainage, pain reduction, rejuvenation, increased flexibility, relaxation and stimulation. It also supports and resolves issues in the musculoskeletal system, and works to break up adhesions in the muscles and the fascial system.

A muscle is a band of fibers that stretch and contract. Anytime a muscle is not functioning optimally, muscle guarding, or splinting, will occur, and the body will pull from another area to compensate. This will affect the movement of the body, and will be felt and seen in the musculoskeletal system. For example, a horse that is sore on a front leg will compensate by using other muscles, which may then lead to this horse having issues on his opposite hind leg as he works to guard or protect the original, injured leg. These spasms and adhesions manifest in the fascia layer and within the muscles themselves. Fascia is the tough connective tissue that creates a 3-dimensional web which extends without interruption from head to toe. Think of fascia as a tightly woven net or spider web; it surrounds and infuses every muscle, bone, nerve, blood vessel and organ, all the way down to the cellular level—it “holds” the body together. An example is the white, glistening fibers that are present when pulling a piece of chicken skin from the meat.

Indications for Massage

We, humans, can often “make do” with the pain, seek medical help, exercise, or medication. An animal is dependent on his human counterpart to provide relief. To tell us they are in pain, animals may turn to non-verbal communication. Resistance—in the form of bucking, rearing, pulling, hollowing their back and increased agitation in horses—or refusal to obey normal commands, coordination difficulties, increased lethargy and short-stepping in dogs—are an attempt to express pain and discomfort. There is generally a fine line between the animal's expression of stubbornness and pain, and often these qualities are linked.



Nine year old "Bentley Wently Wentworth" receives regular messages and Reiki treatments from Inez to help with emotional concerns and to keep his active body healthy (Photos by David Kapper)

Benefits of Massage

Many of the benefits humans receive from massages also extend to animals. These include:

- Boosting the immune system
- Enhancing muscle tone and range of motion
- Reducing inflammation and swelling in the joints
- Promoting the healing process by increasing the flow of nutrients to the muscles, and aiding in carrying excessive fluids and toxins
- Creating a positive effect on the contractual and release process of the muscles
- Helping to maintain the whole body in better physical condition
- Assisting in balancing the body by treating it as a whole, rather than individual parts

Massage has also been beneficial to those with arthritis and hip dysplasia. There is evidence that massage therapy helps with the production of synovial fluid, a valuable element in joints and muscle. Massage therapy moves fluids through the muscles and takes tension off the tendons surrounding the joint. Regular massage during the life of your pet may help prevent the stiffness and pain that contributes to arthritis. In addition to the physical benefits, there are also emotional benefits from massage. Animal massage may improve the pet's trust in their human, help to encourage bonding, help to lessen behavior problems and help ill pets and pets with chronic pain. Massage therapy works well in conjunction with traditional veterinary care, acupuncture, Reiki, aromatherapy and other integrative modalities. Pet

owners should note that massage is not a substitute for veterinary care. Contraindications include: fever, open wounds, acute trauma, skin problems of fungal origin, infectious diseases, and abnormal heat and swelling. Severe conditions require diagnosis and treatment by your veterinarian.

Healing More Than Muscles

The purpose of massage therapy is to enhance the overall health and well-being of the recipient. One of the best things about massage is that it can be used as a preventative, and the animal doesn't need to be ailing to receive and benefits from massage. So go on—consider massage therapy for your pet. The benefits provide healing for more than just their muscles. 🐾



Right: "Gracie", available for adoption at the Baltimore Humane Society. (Photo by Inez Donmoyer)

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