

Who's your best friend?

Caring relationships with animals improve people's mental health. Cruelty towards them does not.

The benefits of animals

Caring relationships are crucial for mental wellbeing, and having positive contact with animals is very beneficial for peoples' mental health – anyone with a cherished pet knows this. The benefits¹ are well documented²: animals reduce stress, isolation, depression and other health problems³, and increase physical activity and social interaction.

Animal therapy is a growing field: in addition to visiting people who are sick or lonely, animals can assist in occupational therapy, speech therapy, or physical rehabilitation to help patients recover. The presence of an animal can significantly increase positive social behaviors among children with autism⁴ spectrum disorder, for example. We need more funding for initiatives that are beneficial for both animals and humans, such as sanctuaries, and programs whereby cared-for animals visit aged care homes, treatment centres, schools and so forth.

Despite the mental health benefits, companion animals are declining in Australia⁵. Not experiencing the affection of animals and the character building responsibility for the care will leave us the poorer as a society. For some people the only interaction with animals will be on their plate. This interaction is at the end of a long production chain which typically starts on a factory farm and ends in a slaughterhouse.

Animal cruelty and mental health

Animal cruelty, whether direct, unthinking or systemic, dehumanizes us all. In a kind of collective "numbing", many of us eat meat, wear leather and otherwise use animals

who have been abused in countless ways, but don't react emotionally until the cruelties are directly brought to our attention.

As far back as the late 1600's, philosopher John Locke observed that "harming animals has a destructive effect on those who inflict it". For example, studies⁶ of the connection between cruelty committed against animals and people have increased over the past twenty years, with professionals from a wide range of areas now recognizing that the abuse of animals never occurs in a vacuum⁷ and that it is a "gateway" indicator to other forms of violence. The studies show that children who abuse animals have generally been victims of abuse themselves, have witnessed domestic violence in the home, or learned from their parents to react to anger or frustration with violence. These children then perpetrate that violence against a vulnerable member of their household, such as the companion animal.

Slaughterhouse impacts

You can't have a meat industry without slaughterhouses, but this is an industry with serious adverse impacts on the mental health of all those associated with it.

A 2013 Australian study confirmed a link between slaughterhouses and violence⁸. It was a small study but consistent with a much larger US study⁹ which used data from 581 counties and found slaughterhouses were linked with more rapes and other violent crimes as well as higher total arrest rates. But is this because slaughterhouse work makes people violent or because those who are already violent tend to gravitate to such jobs? The study wasn't

¹<http://www.center4research.org/benefits-pets-human-health/>

²<https://www.animalsandsociety.org/human-animal-studies/society-and-animals-journal/articles-on-the-benefits-of-animals-to-humans/>

³<http://center4research.org/healthy-living-prevention/pets-and-health-the-impact-of-companion-animals/>

⁴<https://petpartners.org/learn/benefits-human-animal-bond/>

⁵<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/we-are-losing-dogs-and-cats-and-it-is-a-great-loss-20160103-glyh67.html>

⁶<http://www.animal-lib.org.au/campaigns/animal-rights-theories/the-psychology-of-violence-against-animals>

⁷<https://www.animal-lib.org.au/campaigns/animal-rights-theories/the-psychology-of-violence-against-animals>

⁸<http://www.news.com.au/national/slaughterhouse-workers-are-more-likely-to-be-violent-study-shows/story-fncynjr2-1226560029984>

⁹http://www.animalstudies.msu.edu/Slaughterhouses_and_Increased_Crime_Rates.pdf



Want a political voice for animals? Join, donate, or find out more about the Animal Justice Party at animaljusticeparty.org. You can also read our policies designed to provide animals with a voice here: animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist.

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just big but carefully designed to investigate precisely this question. It concluded that it is the work that is the problem rather than the people. Slaughtering animals isn't a job we should be protecting; the stench of death and the act of killing damages those at both ends of the knife.

Farmer suicide

Farmers commit suicides at a rate considerably higher than non-farmers, and in some areas the suicide rate can be double the national average¹⁰. Animal farmers typically have ready access to firearms allowing an impulse to become fatal¹¹. High suicide rates are a tragic reflection of an underlying mental health problem. While many Australian farmers have to deal with isolation and the grueling demands of an industry heavily influenced by events beyond their control, our grazing industries and farmers tend to be the most isolated. The most remote areas in Australia have the highest suicide rates; up to nearly triple the rate in cities¹². A general shift to plant based eating will change the face of Australian agriculture. There will be more fruit and vegetable producers and no outback cattle stations.

Compassion fatigue

While all society's mental health is stunted by the cruel ways we treat animals, frontline workers trying to help them suffer most of all. Those who devote their lives to working with abused animals – in rescue, rehabilitation or advocacy - can suffer terrible mental stress. STSD (secondary traumatic stress disorder) aka "*compassion fatigue*"¹³ is common amongst people who work for animals and can include: recurrent nightmares and recollections of the trauma, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, hyper vigilance and an exaggerated startle response. Their experiences can lead

to severe depression or even suicide. It is truly time to fund mental healthcare for such people, and to phase out the violent industries exploiting animals that negatively impact our mental, physical and planetary health.

Policy

Animal Justice Party (AJP) will work with existing mental health experts to integrate animal care and interaction with existing programs.

The AJP believes that just as diet and exercise are crucial for physical wellbeing, caring relationships are crucial for mental wellbeing. In particular, having an animal friend is a great way to keep well adjusted. The challenge is to make the relationship beneficial for both parties.

Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation can also give people an avenue for selfless contribution that can enhance self image. But wildlife care also involves mental health risks. Animal rescuers are frequently under resourced and may be disturbed by the human cruelty whose consequences they may have to deal with.

Key Objectives

1. To expand opportunities for human-animal interaction in ways that benefit both.
2. To expand funding for sanctuaries and wildlife rescue and rehabilitation projects.
3. To fund mental health programs to service the needs of those suffering trauma from their work in animal rescue, rehabilitation or advocacy.
4. To rapidly phase out violent industries exploiting animals which negatively impact mental health.



¹⁰<http://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/2014-10-16/farmer-suicide-rates-bob-katter-fact-check/5805450>

¹¹http://www.rrh.org.au/publishedarticles/article_print_2517.pdf

¹²http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2011-2012/Suicide

¹³<https://www.animalsandsociety.org/helping-animals-and-people/compassion-fatigue/>



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