

The Closeness of Animals

Have you ever wondered why so many people choose to share their lives with animals? And the evidence is huge to substantiate that a large majority of people in the West live with a least one furry companion. In the UK 45% of the population own a pet, and in the USA it is 68%. So what is the attraction? Despite increasing our workload, taking time out of our already over-busy lives and costing us an estimated £14.9 billion in the UK and \$60.28 billion in the USA on food and vet bills, many of us still prefer to have a pet in our lives.

Up until relatively recently, animals were primarily kept as working animals – dogs to herd sheep and cats to catch vermin – but now this is not so much the case. The role of domesticated animals in our world today is mostly for emotional support. The human/animal bond is increasing and wonderful stories of this profound connection are now often documented. There are myriads of books, some becoming best-selling novels and films, depicting this closeness. It seems as well as seeking this closeness for ourselves, we have a magnetic attraction for this connection wherever it happens.

Animals open our hearts and make it easy for us to love them. And a lot of people who like animals often prefer their company to that of other people. Is it because they do not have agendas, they are not deceptive and they are not governed by time in the same way we are? They can teach us so much, if we have the eyes to see, in the ways of unconditional love, not having judgement, having humility and forgiveness, and being patient to name just a few. But within all this it is the feeling of closeness they give us that I think most of us are seeking.

Being close or intimate with things other than loved ones is something that is rarely experienced in our fast-paced world except perhaps by artists or poets or the religious few. Computers and technology, while bringing us closer in many ways, are also keeping us further apart and more separate from physical contact. Animals seem to be filling that gap. They have not, like us, lost their ability to be close and natural with things. As they wander around sniffing, jumping, running and playing, they are being intimate with their surroundings. This is why it is so important for a dog to have off-lead time, and why a working horse will become ill if not allowed some time to wander in the fields. Perhaps it is this desire to return to what is a more natural way of being that attracts us to animals.

A large part of being intimate with another being is to do with the element of touch. Learning how to touch your pet in a gentle way can open up a gateway of connection that will go much deeper than general petting. In a study funded by the US Government's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine it was discovered that 'light touch' produced more oxytocin – labelled the 'trust hormone' – and less cortisol, the stress hormone. Oxytocin promotes mother-child bonding and appears to be associated with greater relaxation, willingness to trust others and general psychological stability. Even playing with your dog can

cause a surge of oxytocin, according to a 2009 study published in the journal 'Hormones and Behavior'. Cortisol on the other hand is a stress hormone released by the adrenal glands and is important for helping your body deal with stressful situations. It is responsible for the fight or flight response. So by the use of a light, gentle touch we can be causing well-being in ourselves and our animals, and be teaching our animals to trust us on both physical and emotional levels.

Being mindful and respectful in the way we are around our animals is also crucially important if we want to engender a deeper bond; remembering that we are much bigger in size than our pet, and we stand on two legs not down on the ground on four, which immediately makes us appear dominant to them. All animals are experts at reading body language so we have to be very aware of the signals our body is sending. This is one reason why it is important to bend down when you greet a dog or a cat for the first time and not to look an animal directly in the eyes unless you know them well and they trust you.

A good rule of thumb is to always be relaxed in our bodies. The moment we tense our muscles, they read this a sign of threat – either we are going to do something to them or there is something we are fearful of that they need to protect us from. Make a mental note to relax your body and hands when you touch your animal, to breathe evenly and to slow down. Animals are extremely sensitive and pick up when we are focusing on them or thinking about something else. They can read our intent with alarming speed and accuracy and if we are thinking loving thoughts about them they know it and respond accordingly.

Touching your animal in this way is much more intense than general petting so it is advisable to stop and pause every few minutes. Check whether they are enjoying the experience and if not, change what you are doing. Allow them to move away if they want to and you may find they choose to return to you in a short while.

By using some of these simple techniques you will find that touching your animal will become a great deal more pleasurable for you and your pet, and you will be building and deepening that bond of developing closeness that you may be seeking with your pet.

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