Pets can RELIEVE mental health sufferers of symptoms, ‘important’ study claims

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PET’S have the power to relieve mental-health sufferers of their symptoms, a psychiatry study has revealed.

In a study published by scientific journal BMC Psychiatry, Dr Helen Brooks from Manchester University discovered that pets acted as “a form of encouragement” for those with mental health conditions, whilst distracting them from “symptoms and upsetting experiences”.

One participant, who wished to remain anonymous, said: “When you just want to sink into a pit and just sort of retreat from the entire world, they force me, the cats force me to sort of still be involved with the world.”

Another, also choosing to remain anonymous, added: “They [the pets] don’t look at the scars on your arms, or they don’t question things or question where you’ve been.”

During the study, when Dr Brooks asked the participants to identify what helped them manage their condition, six out of ten said their pets were a direct source of support.

One participant who hoped pets will be introduced into future mental health programmes, said it’s difficult for people who don’t have illnesses to understand the importance of the study.

The participant said: “I think it’s hard when you haven’t had mental illness to know what the actual experience is for someone who has had the experience.

“There’s a chasm, a deep chasm between us - a growing canyon.”

In agreement with the participant’s comment, Dr Janette Young from the University of South Australia said her previous pet research has been dismissed as “trivial”.

She said: “Pets are, it seems to be, this amazing untapped and unrecognised resource - and you don’t have to tell people to have pets, you have them anyway.

“I’ve had people ask, ‘is that serious research?’ But I think pets are amazing in that in my field, health promoters spend a lot of time telling people what they should be doing and people ignore them.

“Understanding how this human-to-non-human stuff works, it’s like this little gold mine that we’re not recognising in terms of our welfare and our wellbeing.”

Common mental health disorders

Common mental health disorders from anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder and phobias.

Fellow academic Dr Janette Young from the University of South Australia said she was not surprised by the study because people who had limited or difficult human relationships would usually have an important relationship with their pets.

Speaking to ABC news, Dr Young said: “We think that the way that pets operate is that they add to our relationship network and we know that the strengths of relationships makes a difference to people’s wellbeing.

“Often when people have mental health issues they will have relatively fewer positive relationships and more negative relationships in their networks.”