

**THE ROLE OF COMPANION  
ANIMALS IN COUNSELING AND  
PSYCHOLOGY**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

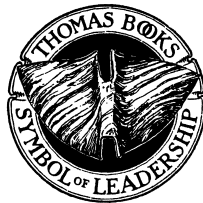
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# THE ROLE OF COMPANION ANIMALS IN COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGY

Discovering Their Use  
in the Therapeutic Process

*By*

JANE K. WILKES, R.N., M.A.P.P.C.



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*In gratitude to canine companions,  
who give so much, yet ask so little.  
Simply put, they make the world  
a better place.*



## PREFACE

The human health benefits derived from relationships with companion animals have attracted a lot of scientific interest and research. However, there is a need for theoretical conceptualizations in order to understand the healing benefits of human-animal interactions. This book represents the author's journey into seeking out the answers to "how" and "why" companion animals play a role in counseling and psychology. It begins by describing how aspects of her personal story became integrated with current literature to guide the questions that became the focus of her master's thesis, which is the foundation of this publication.

The purpose of the project encompassed within this book was twofold. The first goal was to discover the role of companion animals in the therapeutic process of counseling and psychology. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with three psychologist participants who use animals in their therapy settings. The focus of the interviews was to determine their experiences of having a companion animal present during therapy sessions. The results revealed that pets in therapy: (1) *enhanced the therapeutic alliance/relationship*, (2) *enhanced the therapeutic environment*, (3) *enhanced professional practice*, and (4) *created a sense of sacredness*.

The second purpose of this book was to apply the four themes that arose from the interviews to Winnicott's concepts of the holding environment and transitional phenomena (Phillips, 1988). The results suggested that the therapy animals supplied qualities of the phenomena of "good-enough-mother," and in doing so, played a role in the creation and maintenance of what Winnicott referred to as "the holding environment." The therapy animals seemed to provide the trust and safety needed for clients to work within the transitional space and that the animals may act as transitional objects for some clients.

This book suggests that the therapy animals were extremely helpful in providing a sense of safety for traumatized clients and could act as catalysts, especially with defensive and/or detached clients. These conclusions appear to agree with Fine and Mio, who stated, “with the sensitive use of animals, [therapists] may very well achieve a therapeutic breakthrough” (2006, p. 514). It would seem that skilled therapists may find animal-assisted therapy to be a powerful tool to have at their disposal.

J.K.W.



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It has been said that there is nothing but heaven itself that is better than a friend who is truly a friend. I am blessed to have a friend such as this in Colleen Burrows. I thank her for serving as a constant cheerleader who called regularly to check up on my progress. She always managed to “prop me up” when I was feeling overwhelmed.

Lastly, I would like to thank my two dogs, Willy and Maggie, for being at my side day in and day out. Their “presence” supported me so many times when I began to falter. Through an encouraging paw, or a lick, or a nudge, my fears and frustrations would begin to dissipate. Their constant unconditional love served to remind me of why I was doing this thesis project in the first place.



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## Chapter 1

### PICKING UP THE SCENT

During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, emergency efforts were difficult at best. In one particular situation, such efforts became almost impossible because a crying elderly woman needed to cling to her Yorkshire terrier dog as emergency workers attempted to lift her into an already overloaded helicopter. In his frustration, the attending trooper ordered, “You can’t bring that.” The older woman’s desperate cries and pleas alerted the attending flight surgeon. The trooper’s reluctant response to the flight surgeon’s request for the dog was accompanied by “Sir, we have orders not to bring on any dogs.” The surgeon’s response was quick and effective. “That’s not a dog—that’s medicine” (Ubelacker, 2005, p. A2).

This story reflects two distinct aspects of this book. First, it speaks to my experience of desperately clinging to a furry friend when feeling frightened and confused. Second, the flight surgeon’s comment that the dog was medicine echoes my belief, cultivated through actually experiencing the healing capabilities of canine companions. Through this experience, a review of the literature, and the discoveries to be presented in this book, I have come to acknowledge that companion animals provide the perfect mirror into our darkness while providing the unconditional love and acceptance needed to venture into unknown territory. Although dogs, as companions and helpers, will be the major focus of this writing, I now conclude that all animals have a way of linking us to something deep within, something that touches us intensely, something that makes a connection to our hearts and to our souls.

Many people look back on their relationships with pets with a fondness hard to put into words. They see their animals as significant others who have served as important markers to the various transitions and phases of their lives (Jalongo, 2004). I know that my dogs played a large role in helping me survive the difficult years of childhood. I often wonder if I would be here today had I not had the constant love of my faithful canine companions to keep me from putting an end to my suffering.

Throughout my childhood, and indeed to this day, my dogs have been there as a source of support and love. My broken childhood was one of loneliness and fear. As a young child, I dealt with the trauma of witnessing and being pulled into my parents' violent fights, as well as the daily grind of living in a home filled with anger and tension. The worst part of my wounding stemmed from my mother's deep resentment toward me. For some strange reason, she viewed me as some sort of competition. In later years, I came to understand that she did not see me as her daughter, but as the other woman vying for the attention of her man.

My mother's resentment of me was demonstrated recently. My brothers took over her estate following her diagnosis of Alzheimer's and needed my okay to sell a piece of property held within my mother's estate. In order to explain why, my eldest brother showed me my mother's will, and, although I was not surprised, I was saddened to see that she continued to see me as competition even after my father's death. When listing the beneficiaries of her estate, she gave a reason for not considering me as equal to my brothers. She wrote, "Because of the gifts bestowed upon Jane by her father. . . ." My father never left me any material gifts, but I guess his love for me was too much for my mother to handle even after he was gone.

I spent years trying to win my mother's approval and to gain an understanding of why I carried such profound pain. To be seen as unworthy by your own mother leaves a hole in your soul that aches beyond belief. The mental and physical abuse I endured from my mother's inability to face whatever it was she projected onto me left me confused and anxious. There were many times that I found life unbearable, and it was at those times that my little dog literally kept me from the action of suicide.

I remember one incident in particular during a time when the urge to shut off the pain began to take a firm hold. That day, my mother's



attack on my character had been particularly venomous. My two older brothers joined in, seeming to find a sense of joy in helping to destroy what little self-esteem remained. Once the supper dishes were done, I went to my room. No one noticed that I had taken a paring knife with me. I stared at the knife as I wept silently on my bed, filled with a sense of hopelessness. I soon heard a scratching on my door accompanied with anxious yipping and whining. I opened the door to my room and Scamper, my dog, began jumping up on me. As I knelt on the floor to pick him up, I began to sob. In my brokenness, my little furry friend brought healing. His wet kisses helped to heal my most profound inner worries and fears. Through a long cuddle with him, I felt I could once again face the human world.

One may ask where my father was in all of this. I believe my dad truly loved me; however, having to deal with my extremely moody and needy mother day in and day out left him with little energy for a relationship with me. My father should have shielded me from my mother's abuse, but he did not and probably could not. For many years, I managed to excuse and rationalize my father's failure to protect by attributing it to my own unworthiness in order to preserve the bond I had with him. I placed my father on a pedestal and attempted to meet the high demands he placed on me by becoming a high achiever who demanded personal perfection.

Most of the nurturing I received as a child came from the family dogs. Our first little dog, Scamper, carried me through to my high school years. He helped me cope with the sadness that goes along with feeling unwanted. The rejection I experienced resulted in a profound sense of isolation. Upon reflection, I realize that although I felt disconnected to humankind in my early years, I was blessed to have been able to acquire a sense of connection from my dog. Scamper's unconditional love provided the hope of a better tomorrow. His caring eyes allowed me to gain inklings of self-worth.

When Scamper died, I was devastated. I came home after school in mid-September to find a note on the kitchen table that said, "Scamper died. We've gone to bury him." My marks soon began to fall, and I felt a heavy cloak of depression descend upon me. Life at home was a nightmare, and I had no ally to turn to when I felt the chaotic emotions begin to overwhelm me.

In November, my girlfriend's dog had puppies, and I managed to receive permission from my parents to keep a cute little black bundle