



The Use of Animal-Assisted Therapy in Psychiatric Nursing

The Story of Timmy and Buddy

ABSTRACT

A therapy session gone wrong and a therapy dog in training having a bad day combined to remind those of us who work daily with people who have chronic, severe mental illnesses that our idea of what is successful is not always true. This is the story of how a tiny

dog acting in a nontherapeutic way helped a young man learn how to get along better with other human beings, as well as how a nurse who thought she knew better learned a lesson about conflict resolution in human-animal relationships.

EILEEN NIKSA, MSN, RN, CNS-Psychiatric

Get that dog away from me!" Timmy's* facial expression went from anger to fear, from hurt to humiliation. Buddy continued barking. As Timmy became more upset and tense, the barking became louder and more threatening. Buddy, the 6-pound Chihuahua, strained at his leash to get closer to the source of his displeasure—Timmy, a 200-pound, mentally impaired, African-American boy with thick eyeglasses that were set in rims that circled Timmy's head. The glasses made Timmy's eyes appear several times larger than their actual size. Buddy had never seen anyone like Timmy before. As Timmy was jumping around, alternately going toward and then backing away from the barking dog, it was clear neither the boy nor the dog knew what to do next. And I, the dog's owner and trainer, desperately searched my mind for a way to achieve a positive outcome from this sadly comical war of wills.

A BAD FIRST ENCOUNTER

A few years ago, I was working as the Psychiatric Mobile Nurse Specialist for the community drop-in centers in Philadelphia. There, I ran the Health Check Program, through which I visited three centers in Philadelphia and provided various mental health and social services to consumers who visited the centers. The program also offered health screenings and referrals to a population consisting primarily of individuals who were homeless and mentally ill.

As a certified animal-assisted therapist (AAT), I had begun bringing my new dog Buddy with me to work. I now felt as if my child had been caught stealing candy from the corner store as

Buddy continued his nontherapeutic behavior. Usually a very sweet, if somewhat verbal, dog, Buddy had identified Timmy as a serious threat, and Timmy had responded in kind. They continued to bark at each other in the hall as I put Buddy in my office and shut the door. Taking Timmy with me to another room, I began the task of helping him process what had just occurred.

Due to a hearing impairment, Timmy's speech is garbled and loud; because of his brain disorder, words shoot out of his mouth like machine-gun fire. Understanding Timmy was difficult, at best, and now that he was so upset, well, the first task was obviously just to help him calm down. We focused on how brave and smart he had been in facing this strange animal and new situation. By our concentrating on what he had done well, instead of what had gone wrong, Timmy's stress level began to decrease. My stress level still had quite a way to go. I felt acutely responsible for Timmy's distress. How could I use this event to help Timmy in some way?

A LOT IN COMMON

As I thought about the situation, I realized that Timmy and Buddy actually had a lot in common. Because of Buddy's "disability" (being a dog instead of a human being), his behavior was unpredictable. Although Buddy had a friendly and sweet disposition most of the time, he was sensitive to real or perceived threats to his well-being and did not hesitate to respond to threats with noisy aggression. Barking and growling are his only "verbal" means of communicating his needs, and, for a dog or a person, this is an important capability. Not being able to communicate clearly is a frustrating and upset-

ting position to be in. Timmy often becomes angry and impatient when others cannot understand him. His behavior can quickly change from being calm and friendly to being hostile and aggressive if he feels put down. It was interesting that Buddy and Timmy had each attempted to communicate their fear by threatening his opponent. Defending by offending. Hmm...

Now, I am not saying that a dog is equal to a human being, nor am I implying that by having a mental disability, a human being is more like a dog, but the similarities between dog and human behavior are fascinating and lend themselves to some, well, self-discovery. The purpose of psychotherapy is to elicit self-understanding, and the basis of using animals in therapy is to help facilitate that understanding. Upsetting a patient with a barking, vicious little dog is not usually how it is done; in fact, AATs try not to use dogs that bark for this very reason. Having a therapy dog bark at you is the ultimate rejection, and people with mental illnesses rarely benefit from additional humiliation. Timmy had already experienced more than his share of humiliation and adversity in his life. As Timmy and I continued to explore what meaning this incident held for him, I began to realize that he was already making connections on his own. He was comparing this rejection to what happens to him sometimes with other people.

A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING

"Sometimes I hate people," Timmy expounded. "What do you mean?" I asked. Much of



© 2007, SXC, HAAP Media Ltd, a subsidiary of JupiterImages

* Name changed for anonymity purposes.

what Timmy said next I could not understand, but the volume of his speech was increasing, so I asked, "Do you have a lot of arguments with people?" "Yeah," Timmy looked distressed again. "What happens after the argument?," I asked. Timmy looked puzzled. "What do you mean?," he asked; his speech was clearer as he became calmer. I could see him trying to remember what happened after he argued with someone. "I mean, do you ever make up, you know, be friends again?," I asked. "No! Never!," he said. It was clear that Timmy did not have much experience successfully resolving conflicts with people in his life. Forgiving and forgetting after an argument can involve huge amounts of trust, something Timmy had not been able to develop for people in his life. Maybe Buddy could help him with this. Dogs are very trusting and forgiving.

When I suggested to Timmy that maybe he and Buddy had just gotten off on the wrong foot, Timmy was understandably doubtful. Giving the dog another chance at friendship after what had just happened was not the usual way Timmy did things. But one thing Buddy had going for him is that he is awfully cute. He is also little; at 6 pounds, Buddy is not very frightening, and when he is in his usual good humor, he is very engaging. Timmy was willing to consider his own part in the misunderstanding, that maybe he had frightened the dog, too, by yelling and being so much bigger.

Timmy's willingness to consider his own part in the interaction was a big step. Often, people with mental disabilities are so active in the defense of their psyche that they develop barriers to new ways of thinking and behaving. The fact that Timmy was willing

to give Buddy another chance was significant. Perhaps because Buddy is a dog and not a person, Timmy felt less threatened, more willing to trust, and more hopeful to make a new friend. After all, dogs are man's best friend.

ANOTHER CHANCE TO MAKE A NEW FRIEND

As I went to my office to retrieve Buddy, I tried to feel confident that I was doing the right thing by reintroducing Buddy and Timmy. My strong belief in the positive effects that nature and animals can have on human health made me think that I was. But there was something about Timmy that frightened my little dog. Maybe it was Timmy's size. This time, I held Buddy up in my arms as I reintroduced him to Timmy. I could feel Buddy tense as his eyes watched Timmy's uneven, sudden movements. Part of Timmy's disability made smooth, calm actions impossible, and anxiety or stress made it worse. I encouraged Timmy to gently pet Buddy's head. "Slowly now. He likes you, but he's just not used to you yet," I cautioned, "Try it with just two fingers."

As Timmy stroked Buddy's tiny head with two fingers, I watched as a smile slowly grew and spread to the rest of Timmy's face. "He likes me!," Timmy yelled. I reminded him to speak softly until the dog was really used to him. I pointed out to Timmy that just like people, dogs sometimes get frightened by loud voices and sudden movements. As Timmy continued to pet Buddy while I held him, I explained that until someone knows you, they may respond to you in a negative way. "Sometimes people don't like each other at first. They maybe get off on the wrong foot. So, some-

times you can give people a second chance, like Buddy," I said.

It was clear that Buddy and Timmy were hitting it off better this time. Buddy was wagging his tail and trying to lick Timmy's face. "Ugh," Timmy pulled his face away, laughing. Everyone watching laughed, too. I hoped that this little dog had taught Timmy a lesson in trust and second chances that he could someday apply to other people. As Timmy continued smiling and petting Buddy, he said he was glad he had agreed to give Buddy a second chance, although he had never believed they would be friends.

SUMMARY

I sometimes hear animal lovers say that they like pets more than people, and this makes me sad. Human beings are an intelligent and complex animal, capable of great and terrible things. When we do not like other people, it is usually because we do not understand their behavior. As I explain to the clients I work with, understanding is the source of our highest power. Animals and nature can help us achieve this understanding by teaching us about ourselves and about others. That is the basis of animal-assisted therapy.

Ms. Niksa works for the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania.

The author thanks Aaron Katcher, MD, who developed the Certification in Animal Assisted Activities and Therapy, for his lifelong interest in and study of the effects of animals on human health. The author also thanks her dog, Buddy.

Address correspondence to Eileen Niksa, MSN, RN, CNS-Psychiatric, Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1211 Chestnut Street, 11th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107; e-mail: eniksa@mhasp.org or eniksa@hotmail.com.

Copyright of *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Services* is the property of SLACK Incorporated and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.