

Animals have positive effects on human health and wellbeing - this has been documented by a growing number of studies during the last decades. Interacting with a friendly animal can improve mood, calmness, concentration, social interaction and communication, and reduce anxiety, aggression and stress-related parameters such as blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels. This is true for humans of all ages, but especially for those with impairments in physical and mental health or with special needs. Companion animal owners also report better health and making up to 15% less doctor visits. The underlying mechanisms of these positive effects of human-animal interactions are less well investigated. However, some factors have been identified as important: the activation of the oxytocin-system, stress regulation via social support, acceptance and motivation. Oxytocin, the calm and connecting system, is activated in positive social interactions with animals. Gentle touch and physical contact, which is highly regulated in interpersonal interactions, seems to play a key role with regard to the activation of the oxytocin system and its effects such as reduction of stress parameters and increase of social interaction and bonding. Animals accept owners and clients in animal assisted interventions irrespective of their Problems. Furthermore it seems as if working with animals was intrinsically motivating for most humans, probably also due to human biophilia. This is of special importance for therapy and education, since clients who are difficult to motivate often can be motivated to participate in animal assisted interventions.