

Animal Massage

Meet Their Need For Touch

BY PATRICIA WHALEN-SHAW

Just like humans, animals touch their young a great deal from birth. And just like humans, animals respond to and benefit from nurturing touch from birth to death. As animal massage practitioners, our goal is to not only evaluate an animal's physical nature, but also to build trust, communication, and respect with this somewhat silent client. When that is accomplished, the therapy session becomes a symbiotic experience where animal and therapist work together and healing begins.



DIFFERENCES, SIMILARITIES

“Touch is the earliest and possibly the most important of all the canine senses,” writes veterinarian Bruce Fogle in his book *The Dog’s Mind*. Like humans, newborn puppies and kittens require total care. Even horses, who within hours are able to move about, eat, and eliminate without parental care, still get touched throughout their first hours and days. Animals like horses lick their young clean, scent them, and make noises to them so they can later tell which young one is theirs out of the herd.

Humans and animals share many similarities in their need for touch. When a professional therapist offers therapeutic massage, both animal and human feel the benefits. From muscle spasms and joint stiffness to injury and age, the animal body suffers like the human body. Animals also suffer the grief of losing a companion, need rehab after surgery, and feel the rigors of competition, overtraining, and overuse. They have daily stressors, including noise and confinement, and despite their typically hairy exterior, an animal’s tissues feel much the same in texture and tension as their human counterparts.

When animals reach maturity, their muscle response time is often quicker than ours when in the midst of fight-or-flight. The processing and release of tension from an animal’s tissues is also a faster process than humans. Smaller animals typically have a faster heart rate than larger animals or humans, and many of them will breathe more deeply and more quickly when releasing a tight muscle. Sometimes animals will arch their backs and contract the muscles of their appendages in a full-body stretch during the massage. Often, they will have what appears to be a muscle energy release in the form of kicks or large twitch responses.

Animals are generally better at stretching than most of us. A dog will stretch almost every time it gets

up from resting. Dogs and other animals will typically reset their nervous systems, and their hair or feathers, with full-body shakes after a massage. In fact, observing that shake and its progression is one way to tell areas are not completely balanced, as those areas do not move smoothly.

a vigorous tail movement is generally warning you to stay away; it is less than open to touch. Yet, rhythmical end of the tail movement may mean it is contented and very much OK with being touched. The same movement for a horse could mean it is swatting flies or, when more actively used, to

Humans and animals share many similarities in their need for touch.

With animals, the touch strength required during massage is not in direct correlation to the animal’s size. Each hair on the animal’s body relays sensory input about the world around it. Animals also have the same pressure and pain, as well as the heat and cold receptors we have, but many also have thin muscles within the skin layer that can be used to flick off a fly.

INITIATING BODYWORK

Bodywork on animals is similar in many ways to infant massage because work must be done without verbal cues. Animal massage practitioners must watch for the body language responses to judge pressure and pain/pleasure responses to touch, as well as judge coolness or warmth, tension or scarring, muscle spasming, twitching, protective contracture, and adhesions.

Each animal species that interacts with others of their kind has a set of body language responses. Practitioners for animals must learn what are the generally accepted responses or movements and their meanings. For example, you may think a dog wagging its tail is showing you that it’s friendly and wants to be petted or touched. In reality, a wagging tail only means that the dog is open to interaction, not necessarily touch. A cat making

look out or back off. The speed of movement, the height of the tail, the amount of tail being brought into the conversation, as well as what the rest of the body posture is saying, comes into play. These are all important cues a successful animal massage practitioner needs to know. Reading the body language conversation ensures that the touch is safe for both the animal and the practitioner. To not do so could mean real trouble for the practitioner.

Another important skill for animal massage therapists is understanding how animals survive and process their worlds. Animals live in the present. They very often have memory of the past—good and bad—at the hand of humans, but they do not think about the future. They live today. They have enough food today. They are wet now. They are safe now. The pressure exerted is acceptable or not. So, if the touch application is not OK, we may inadvertently bring forward the fight-or-flight (sympathetic nervous system) response. That is rarely good for the practitioner, because if the animal cannot flee, it has little choice left but to fight to save itself from what it perceives as a threat.

For humans, healing occurs while the parasympathetic system is dominant in the system. The same is true



Edge, a 5-month-old Weimaraner, looks forward to his daily massage, says his owner, Melissa Chandler, a graduate of Integrated Touch Therapy. She says touch is vital during the initial bonding time with an animal and helps later on during vet appointments and performance events. Frequent massage also allows you to know your puppy's body and be proactive if anything changes.

with animals. Making an animal the recipient of our touch techniques while it is resisting or trying to get away from us does not accomplish true healing and often can re-traumatize the animal at the site of a previous injury. The animal knows you are hurting it right now and you become the object of its fear.

Above all else, touch needs to be respectful of animals. Keeping in mind that they live in the now, in the present, those techniques that are hurtful—having so much pressure or applied so strongly that they would cause pain or bruising—are not a good idea in animal massage. The faulty thinking being that because the animal is big, like a horse, it will take more pounds per square inch of pressure to get the muscles released is false and potentially life threatening to the practitioner. These animals



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are so in tune with their bodies that once a practitioner sets up trust and communication, the animal will move in such a way that it will often guide the session. Animals will move so that the area of most concern to them is presented to the practitioner; they will lean back into the practitioner's hands, indicating the angle of application, as well as the pressure. Practitioners do not have to decide what is best; the animal will guide us. Therein lies a big difference between many human and animal massage sessions.

Many times, the animal is initially open to being touched where it is not threatened, or where it is used to being touched. Dogs are often touched on the top of the head and greeted from the side, while horses are often approached from the horse's left side. These would be potential places to begin the massage. Often the animal's keeper knows a good place to begin, for example a place the animal particularly likes scratched or petted. There are no hard and fast rules for where to begin, just some suggestions based on each animal's preferences when interacting with humans.

Some animals will only allow you to begin where they are not hurting or concerned. This way it is safe for them and generally safe for you, and is also a way to begin to establish trust and communication. If the animal allows it, we will get to the real issue area. Yet, all the while, the therapist must remember that massage is not acute care—that is the veterinarian's realm. A little patience on the therapist's part is rewarded by acceptance and allowing from the animal. The tissues will open up and let you in.

I always try to remember that it is their process. The animal sets the timing of the session's progression. In a quadruped, what happens in the front affects the rear, and vice versa. Left-side and right-side interactions, as well as cross-body interactions also occurs. Moving blood, and/or removing



Patricia Whalen-Shaw demonstrates techniques on willing client Salvador.
Photos courtesy of Integrated Touch Therapy.

congestion happens within the entire closed system, even if touch is not directly applied at the site. Techniques that accomplish decongestion alone, applied within the comfort level of the animal, bring about huge changes. Any gently applied massage and bodywork technique, including craniosacral therapy, fascia release, lymph drainage, reiki, sports massage, Swedish massage, or any of the many other effective techniques can be used on animals. The animals will show they have individual preferences, evidenced by their willingness to participate in the session.

GETTING TO WORK

On first contact, I greet the dog (or other animal), as well as the human on the end of the lead. A good health history, including the veterinary diagnosis, needs to be gathered. While the keeper is completing that work, time can be taken to let the dog sniff around and smell you and to check out the area in which you will be working. It is time well spent. When the dog feels the area is safe, it settles down much more quickly in most cases.

While the dog is inspecting the surroundings, I am observing its body alignment and foot placement. During the first couple of sessions, many dogs are likely to work a little, walk around a little, work a little, get distracted by something else, come back and work a little, etc. These sessions have come to be known as “drive-by” massage. To get started, these types of sessions are OK. But with each session comes trust and eventually the dog will come to a comfortable place in the treatment area and settle for your work.

Generally, if the keeper has given permission to touch and the dog is comfortable with the surroundings, the session starts out quietly with light effleurage or passive touch. Where do you start? Wherever the dog is most comfortable, as long as it is safe for me to do so. Being face to face,

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ANIMAL MASSAGE

The Battle to Work with Animals



By Rebecca Jones

A recent court ruling in favor of a massage therapist in Maryland who was threatened with the loss of her license if she didn't stop working with horses has done little to resolve a nationwide dispute over who should do animal massage.

In some states, veterinarians insist it should only be done by them or under their supervision. In others, animal massage is regulated, but not under the oversight of veterinarians. And in others, anyone can offer animal massage, regardless of training or licensure.

Even animal massage therapists are divided over who should be allowed to do what and when.

"There really needs to be no regulation of animal massage," insists Mercedes Clemens, who brought suit against the Maryland State Board of Chiropractic Examiners last year when it threatened to revoke her license to practice massage therapy on humans if she didn't shutter her horse massage business.

Clemens was certified in equine bodywork by Equinology Inc., of California. She also received a license to practice "human" massage late in 2007 and thus came under the purview of the chiropractic board in her state. The board contended that animal massage amounted to practicing veterinary medicine without a license, which Clemens steadfastly denies.

The Maryland State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners initially sided with the chiropractic board, but later dropped its objections to Clemens' work with horses. The chiropractic board later rescinded the cease and desist order against Clemens, but would not back down from its position that licensed massage therapists could not legally practice on animals.

On July 30, 2009, the Montgomery County Circuit Court issued a summary judgment in Clemens' favor.

"In Maryland, there has been no instance where there has been any injury to an animal because of animal massage," according to Clemens, who immediately resumed her horse massage practice after the ruling. "Licensing regulation should only be put into place when the public needs to be protected. And the public doesn't need protection from animal massage. It's a very safe practice."

OTHERS AREN'T SO SURE

Lola Michelin, a former veterinary technician with a degree in animal science, founded the Northwest School of Animal Massage (www.nwsam.com) in Fall City, Washington, in 2001. The school attracts students from around the world and offers three levels of certification in both large and small animal massage.

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Michelin agrees with Clemens that it's rare for an animal to be harmed by a massage therapist. But she acknowledges that without proper training, animal massage therapists quite often cross the line and do, in fact, practice veterinary medicine, either by "diagnosing" conditions or doing more than just massage.

"I personally have seen practitioners who do chiropractic work even though they're not trained as chiropractors or veterinarians," Michelin says. "In most states, only veterinarians or animal chiropractors are legally allowed to do joint manipulation. It's no different than a human massage therapist doing chiropractic work. The big concern is that they're diagnosing subluxation. Or worse, they don't even diagnose, they just adjust at random."

Michelin says that as more people are trained in proper animal massage techniques, the problem will lessen. "Nowadays, there are organizations to guide people in proper scope of practice. Ten or 15 years ago, there really was nobody offering up proper guidelines. But there's still a good amount of gray area out there."

Animal massage has unquestionably become more popular in recent years, especially with the growth in rehabilitation services for injured dogs. Hydrotherapy and physical therapy are now routinely prescribed as postoperative care for dogs, and animal massage is a big piece of that. Many veterinarians have integrated animal massage directly into their practices.

But with this increased acceptance of animal massage has come more rigorous scrutiny of the field, and calls for standardized practices and regulation.

That's not a bad thing, Michelin says.

"A lot of people practicing animal therapies don't want a legislative requirement placed on them. And with regulation comes cost. But on the plus side, regulation helps us find good, qualified people with an assured level of training. And it encourages those who don't meet the standards to bring their level of training up, which is a good thing for the industry overall."

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

The International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork (IAAMB) is looking to develop a nationwide uniform scope of practice and to create some form of national competency testing and accreditation in this area. The organization keeps track of laws in each state impacting the practice of animal massage. For a state-by-state listing, visit the IAAMB's website at www.iaamb.org/laws-by-state.php.

The National Board of Certification for Animal Acupressure & Massage (NBCAAM) is another effort underway to certify practitioners in this niche. After working with Hocking College and other massage and acupressure schools, NBCAAM developed a voluntary examination process meant to uphold professional standards for animal acupressure and massage practitioners. For more information, visit www.nbcaam.org.

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inches from the animal's face is not a safe place. Instead, have the dog sit, lie down on a mat, or get up on the massage table. Some dogs prefer the table while others want nothing to do with it. A couch, chair, or the keeper's lap are all places to set up a massage session.

A dog will tell you by its willingness to participate how you are doing and if you are starting the massage in an area it feels is acceptable. It may present its head, hip, or a paw. Just as with human massage, touch is introduced with soft, knowing hands usually using effleurage, lymph drainage, or passive touch. Take a few seconds for the tissues to relax. It makes the whole process easier for the practitioner and more is accomplished in the session. As the massage progresses, kneading techniques such as compression, digital circles, finger stripping or thumb glide, chucking, petrissage, and cross-fiber friction can all be used. As long as the technique is applied softly and without creating pain, it can be used on an animal. Remember an animal will defend itself if it cannot get away. And, because it lives in the present, an animal can't reason about feeling better tomorrow after having a painful session today. No matter how it is theoretically supposed to alter the tissues, that sort of processing of events is not in the animal's awareness.

AN ANIMAL PROTOCOL

Within your big picture sequence to open the area, work the area, and close or flush the area, there are many variations, just as there are when working with a human client in a therapeutic setting. Sometimes an area needs only a little attention; sometimes several minutes will be devoted to a single area of the body. As a general rule, I like to touch the entire body; oftentimes the compensation detected in the observation phase is far from the actual muscle imbalance you find when working on the animal manually.

For example, a dog comes in limping, with the diagnosis of right front leg lameness. I'll greet the dog and position it so both the right and left shoulders can be touched for comparison. Sitting or standing is a great option for this work. If the dog does not allow contact, I most generally will go to the other side or to the hips, returning to the front of the dog last. If, upon palpating the right front leg I find the dog is not in the least bothered by my touching him and executing range of motion type movements, I can work there first. However, we may find nothing significant.

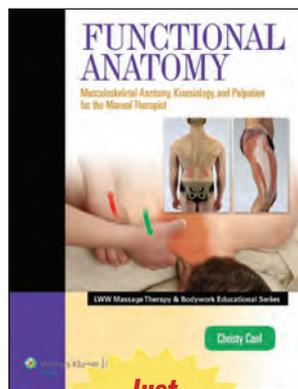
So, if the animal is not lame in the right front leg, where might I go to find the imbalance? I could try palpating the base of the neck, locating the brachiocephalicus for tension causing

restrictions of the shoulder. Or I could look at the scalenus medius muscle and omotransversarius for neck restrictions, or the biceps brachii for tension, which if too tight, manifests a reaction much like thoracic outlet syndrome. Finding nothing there, check the back of the neck, which I expect to feel tight from using the head and neck to compensate in the effort of moving the front leg. Usually, the dog will like work here and this gives you time to compare on both sides of the neck, the base of the neck, and in front of the left shoulder on the biceps brachii, pectorals, and scapula.

If you find something, you will obviously work to release the muscles and often the dog will come back into balance. If not, working down the spine using such techniques as finger stripping, petrissage, or digital kneading can tell you a great deal. If

you find no area to be reactive or tender, just tight, spending time releasing these epaxial muscles (the erector spinae group for you) makes locomotion more free for the dog. The lumbar area just past the ribs can be very sensitive and often is overdeveloped in a dog that spends a lot of time begging or dancing on their hind legs. Just as in humans, trigger points often lie in the tissues of the lumbar area. The release of these trigger points is best accomplished with passive finger touch, following the tissues into the deep regions. Lymph drainage can also be used on each of the points. The work is slow and within the dog's comfort level. Anything more can trigger the dog's defense system or prompt trust issues. You may know what has to be done to release an area, but if the dog is not willing to allow the work,

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The work is slow and within the dog's comfort level.

then you may be putting yourself in danger of getting bitten, or worse yet, you may be re-traumatizing the area.

Once past the lumbar area, the hindquarters may be holding the key to our front leg lameness. If the sacral area is tender or warm, I use passive touch to soften the tissues, then effleurage or lymph drainage to flush the area. Once the sacral area is calmed, I will check the gluteals. Usually the left hind leg will have more tension in our example. Working to release the hip, I use effleurage, passive touch, and then deeper kneading techniques like digital circles or compression using finger pads, followed by effleurage again. This gets the release for which I am looking. If it doesn't, I continue to work down the leg anterior and posterior, taking care not to pinch or entrap anything between the hind legs. The

gastrocnemius muscle sits behind the stifle (knee) and above the hock (tarsus). If it is in spasm, the dog cannot drive forward efficiently and the imbalance can show up in the front right leg. To release this area, chucking is useful, or perhaps sifting. Take great care when working at the hock, as the tissue just superior can be very sensitive.

Next, I will work the right hind as I worked the left hind. The dog may even have been lying on the right hind all along. Generally, this is a clue that the real issue (from the dog's point of view) was in the right hind leg. It is perfect that I get here almost last. Trust has been built, the dog will be relaxed, and it will hopefully allow me to work at the source of the pain. If not, save the work for another visit but don't let too much time go between

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sessions, as all the compensatory tender and trigger points will return.

One last area to address is the caudal vertebra within the body and beyond, known as the tail. Since the tail is so instrumental in balance and communication, I do not want to omit it. The caudal vertebra have attachments for the biceps femoris and semitendinosus, two powerful hamstring muscles in the quadruped for extension of the hip and stifle functions. A simple approach might be to use digital kneading along the vertebra in the body and then effleurage and compression on the rest of the tail. Even dogs that have naturally docked tails and those with docked tails for breed standards have caudal vertebra within their body from the sacrum to the edge of their bodies and then some.

As a practitioner, you cannot see if you are leaving a bruise on most animals, as the skin is dark under all that hair or fur, so work carefully. Tapotements do have some applications during animal massage and range-of-motion techniques can be helpful as well. After an area is treated, flush it out with effleurage again and close the massage, perhaps with stroking.

During, and most certainly after, the massage, I have the dog walk in a straight line and turn to the right and the left, watching to see if it places its feet under itself equally and bends through its body. I am looking for even weight-loading and foot placement and an even bend side to side, from head to tail. One of the most interesting aspects of massage on a quadruped is that any one of those areas of treatment could have held the answer to the soft-tissue lameness. It is a most interesting puzzle, presented to us by a concerned keeper who has already gone through the veterinary channels to clear the animal of any acute diagnosis. The animal knows the area hurts, or that in some way the injury has the potential to lower their status in the pack.

THE REWARDS

So how do we know that our massage is effective? We will see a relaxed body posture, the tissues will soften and become hydrated, and most often, range of motion will be increased. It may be able to use its body more fully such as jump higher, run faster, or be more willing to participate in an activity without resistance. Its coat may shine, its behavior may change, and time required to heal from a surgery may be reduced. If your goal is to be a facilitator in the relationship between the animal and caregiver/keeper, you may be able to empower the keepers to make changes or decisions about the animal and its welfare that they might otherwise not have recognized or been able to make.

Being part of a team of professionals who work together for the best possible

outcome for the animals is terrific. It takes the veterinarian, keeper, trainer, and massage and bodywork practitioner to achieve that best possible outcome. I cannot guarantee I will find the source of the imbalance, but when I do, it is a great day and everyone wins—animal, keeper, and practitioner. **m&b**

6 *Patricia Whalen-Shaw, LMT, NCTMB, APP, RCST, is the primary instructor for Integrated Touch Therapy, Inc., and has been teaching equine, canine, and feline massage for more than 16 years at Synergy Farm in Circleville, Ohio. Whalen-Shaw has written and published three books, two videos, and two DVDs as instructional guides for massaging dogs, cats, and horses. Contact her at wshaw1@bright.net.*



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