

Dog therapy

Our health editor, Nikki Langer, interviewed three people whose jobs show that dogs can improve human health.

Ben Forster, dog trainer

Dogs are the most common therapy animal because they are easy to train, and because there are many different sizes. For a hospital visit, for example, it might be important to have a small dog which someone can hold on their lap. The most important thing, though, is the dog's personality: it must be calm and quiet. Most therapy dogs are not puppies – they are usually at least three years and older – and they have to complete a special training course before they can work in hospitals or schools. There are many benefits for the patients and children. Research has shown that regular contact with dogs can improve physical and mental health.

Andrea Weber, nurse

I work at a residential home for elderly men and women. Our youngest resident is 85. A lot of the people who live here have long-term conditions. It can be hard for them to be active. But I know that every Tuesday, they will come to the main living room to see our pet therapist, Pat, and her beautiful dog Trixie. Trixie is a large dog, with lovely soft fur. When Trixie sits next to you, you want to talk to her and touch her. And while people are waiting to talk to Trixie, they talk to each other. It's a very positive thing.

Jasmin Hussain, tutor

I used to have mental health problems. A few years ago, my doctor recommended getting a dog. She said that walking with a dog and caring for it would help me to recover – and that was true for me. Now Domino comes to the university with me and helps my students. She sits in my office during my classes. When my office door is open, students know they can come in and talk to Domino. My university department has lots of international students and some of them are far away from home. One girl told me that she missed her pet dog more than her parents! If Domino didn't come to work with me, the students would definitely be sad. He's a great dog: very gentle and he loves it when people stroke him. Thanks to my students, he has also learned instructions in several languages!

Kalim, 26

In 2017, my girlfriend and I travelled around Europe for a month. Everything was new to me. It was my first trip outside Turkey and I wanted to impress her. She loves ballet, so in St Petersburg I decided to surprise her by taking her to the ballet. That evening we headed to the theatre wearing our smartest clothes. When the performance started, I realised that I'd made a mistake. We were watching an opera. And they were singing in Russian. We couldn't understand any of the words, but the music was incredible and we could follow the story quite well.

Sergei, 48

Last year I took my wife and two children to Rome. I'd studied there as a student and wanted to show the city to my family. We visited the famous Trevi Fountain which is always busy with tourists taking selfies. My wife was trying to take a selfie of all four of us. I tried to make her laugh by waving my arms around, but – disaster – I fell into the water. We have a very funny picture of my children's faces as I disappear. They were very embarrassed.

Margaret, 69

I'd visited India twice before but I'd never been to the north. One day, I visited The Golden Temple at Amritsar. This beautiful building is not visited very often by Europeans but it is very popular with Indian visitors. I was looking at the beautiful paintings and statues when a man started shouting. I didn't understand what he was saying, so I didn't pay attention. Nor did I notice that everyone else was leaving. When I got to the exit door I realized I'd been shut in. I thought I'd be in the temple all night. Of course, I wasn't alone and they soon let me out. No one thought it was a problem except me. I was so embarrassed.

It's 7 p.m., and Carly Lewis has been in the pool for more than two hours, but she can't stop swimming yet. Before her daily training session, she has a **demanding** day at school, and she'll have homework to finish later tonight. 'I've never worked as hard as I am now,' she smiles. 'But if I **keep going**, maybe I'll be in the team for the next Olympics.'

Carly has been in the pool since she was a baby. Her parents joke that she started swimming before she started walking. She won her first competitions at the age of just six, and nine years later, she's now a **national champion**.

But it wasn't always like this. Carly was born very early, and at first her bones were weaker than normal, and she couldn't walk **easily**. 'Being in the water was good for my body,' she says. 'Nobody expected me to become such a great swimmer!'

'It was very stressful. I wanted to know: 'Will there be flights tomorrow? Will the airline give us our money back?' The information desk didn't have any answers, which was really annoying. They should have a plan for this sort of thing. Some people got angry with the airline workers, which was mean – they were only trying to do their job. I decided to stay at the airport. I thought, 'If a plane arrives, I'll be first in the queue.' I lived in the airport for the next 16 hours. The food was OK, and I even found some showers. It was all very expensive but I kept my receipts. When I arrived home, nearly two days late, I was exhausted.'

'When the computer problem began, I was already at the airport. I'd been on holiday in Istanbul for a week but I'd travelled by ferry from Turkey to Greece especially so I could see Athens. I had to get home to Romania because I had a job interview that Tuesday. So, I stood on my chair and shouted, 'Is anyone trying to travel to Bucharest?' Lots of people put their hands in the air. We stood together and made a new plan. In the end, I rented a car with a business woman and a student from Bucharest University. We divided the cost equally between the three of us. Although the journey was a little bit stressful, I found it exciting. It was a great story to tell at my interview – and my new boss is pleased that I'm good at solving problems.

The happiest country

What makes you happy? Eating a delicious meal? Watching a beautiful sunset? For me, happiness is surfing. I love sitting on my board and watching the sea. When I ride a wave I feel truly happy. I'm Mauricio, and I'm a surfing teacher in Tamarindo – my home town in Costa Rica.

Now, let me ask you another question. Do you think it's possible to measure happiness – to count it and say who is more happy or less happy? Well, it is! Researchers look at numbers such as: how long people live, how much money people have, and how much damage people do to the environment. Then the researchers write a report to say what they have found.

Costa Rica must be a very happy place. Recently we came top in the Happy Planet Index – a list that compares happiness information from 140 countries from all over the world. It is the third time we have been number one! World leaders and politicians are very interested in these happiness reports because the countries that do well can be surprising. Being rich doesn't always make people happy. Some of the richest countries in the world are in low positions on the Happy Planet Index list.

In my job, I enjoy meeting people from all over the world. You don't have to spend a lot of money to enjoy surfing, but some people do. Many surfers travel to Costa Rica from the United States and Australia. I often try to explain how my country is different to theirs. Looking after our beaches and forests is very important to our government and 99% of our electricity comes from 'green' renewable energy.

New year, old customs

by travel editor, Lauren Briard

Have you ever made a New Year's resolution? Perhaps you have decided to learn a new language, or take up more exercise? You are not alone. In many cultures, people choose to change something about their life at the beginning of the year. And all over the world, people celebrate the new year with interesting customs.

My favourite traditions come from Mexico and other Latin American countries. For example, at midnight on New Year's Eve in many Spanish-speaking cultures, everyone eats twelve grapes – one grape for each month of the year.

People say that eating the grapes brings good fortune for the new year. And don't be surprised if your friend from Peru wants to walk around the outside of his or her house with heavy luggage. Traditionally, if you complete this challenge you will be a successful traveller in the new year. Would you like to go on a dream holiday next year? Then try it!

Cleaning the house is perhaps the most common new year tradition. From Mexico to Japan people sweep their homes from top to bottom. Some people believe this removes bad luck and allows good luck to enter the house. In other countries, such as Britain and Iran, the cleaning happens later in the year, so it's called 'spring cleaning'. In Iran, just before the March spring festival, people empty their houses of all their furniture. They clean the house from top to bottom, mend broken furniture or replace old items. People bring flowers and herbs indoors too so their homes smell fresh and clean.

New Year is often celebrated with friends, so my final story is from Denmark. If you are in Denmark at New Year, you will probably see piles of broken plates outside front doors. What's going on? Well, traditionally, people take their old or broken plates and smash them on their friend's front door. It brings good luck to your friend. It's great fun, too! So, a big pile of broken plates means you are a popular person.

Enjoy the new year festival, wherever you are in the world. I hope you are ready with your grapes, luggage and plates!

My free shopping trip

Have you ever been to a shop and bought a dress that was too small or some shoes that were too uncomfortable? I have. Have you ever bought clothes online and then never worn them? Yes, me too. In fact, although my wardrobe is full I usually wear the same trousers and jumpers every week. I think most of my friends have the same problem.

Now imagine a clothes store with no check out and no prices! Last weekend, I went to a store like that. It was a 'Clothes swap' at my college. Here's how it works. You bring clothes that are nearly new which you don't want any more. Then you swap with other people. I took twelve items to the 'Clothes swap'. When I arrived at about 9.30, it was already busy. One of the student organizers checked that my items were clean and nearly new. Then she gave me twelve labels – a label per item – which I could swap for new clothes.

Last autumn I was helping my sister to find a photographer for her wedding. I was looking at wedding photographs online when I saw my first sakura picture. Sakura, or cherry blossom, are light pink flowers that arrive in spring on cherry trees. The flowers are very popular with everyone in Japan.

After my sister's wedding, I needed a quiet holiday. I decided to visit Tokyo and see the cherry blossom. I booked a week in a hotel in April. I bought a new camera and searched online for the best places to look at the trees. I arrived safely and checked into my clean, comfortable hotel. I slept well and got ready for my first day of sakura photography.

My name's Victor and I'm 25 years old. I'm from Brasilia and I'm single. I'm studying Business Studies at London University. It's really interesting and I love London. My mum and dad are English teachers so my English is good. I want to work in Europe when I leave university.

People think that I'm a quiet person when I first meet them, but my best friends in Brasilia say that I'm very talkative! I run with a running group from my university. I run most days, sometimes with the group and sometimes alone, and I try to eat lots of healthy food.

I live in a house with three other students. We go out to a restaurant together every Friday night. At the weekend, my three housemates like loud bars and clubs, but I prefer museums and cafés.

I've got short black hair and brown eyes. Sometimes I have a beard but I don't at the moment. I'm looking for a partner who is kind and funny. I'd like to meet someone who has the same interests as me.

'People ought not to panic in these situations. But we do. It's normal human psychology. If we feel trapped, we try to run away or we get angry. That's why people sometimes get angry in traffic jams – they just want to escape. This happens even if we're not physically trapped – so although we are not in danger, we still feel that running is a good idea. The best thing to do, usually, is to stay where you are. I was in Madrid on business when the computers at Heathrow broke down. I didn't go to the airport, I phoned my hotel straight away and booked three extra nights. With my laptop and good wi-fi I could still work easily.'

There were changing rooms and mirrors, so I tried on a few things. I wanted a blue party dress but there wasn't anything blue in my size. I decided not to look at the shoes at all. (I don't need more shoes!) Instead, I tried on a cute black skirt and smart white shirt. They were perfect. By lunchtime, I still had ten labels but it was time to go. Although I swapped just two items for my original twelve – I was happy.

The 'Clothes swap' was a lot of fun. My wardrobe and my bedroom are tidier. Swapping is also good for the planet because it is a kind of recycling. The clothes I brought home are not new, but they feel new to me. I think swap events are something that everyone can enjoy. Happy swapping!

Then the problems started. Although it was morning, when I arrived at Inokashira Park it was already very busy. Couples were on dates. I couldn't get near to the trees. My pictures were a disaster. At the end of the day, I went back to my hotel feeling quite sad. But when I was looking at my photos that evening, I found one picture of a little boy looking at the flowers. He was laughing. It was a great picture.

The next day I returned to Inokashira Park but this time I only took pictures of people. I spoke to people who I thought looked interesting and I asked to take their picture with the flowers. I had fun and I met lots of friendly people. Now when I look at my sakura pictures, I remember the cherry blossom but I also remember the stories.

Apichatpong is familiar with sleeping in cinemas. He says: 'I always fall asleep during my movies ... and during other people's movies. The best cinema is inside your head.' He is interested in what happens when people sleep and especially in their dreams. This is one of the reasons why sleeping people are a common sight in his previous films. The hotel has a dream book where guests can write about the dreams they had in the Sleep Cinema Hotel. Perhaps surprisingly, so far most guests have said they slept very well in the cinema.

People without tickets for the hotel can watch the film – and the sleeping guests – from the balcony area. Hurry! The project is only open for five days.