

HOW REIKI HELPS SHELTER AND SANCTUARY ANIMALS

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Despondent cats and dogs become more social and seem happier. Sick animals are aided in their recovery. Most amazingly, animals who have been here for a long time often get adopted shortly after treatments.

Amelia Funghi, Berkeley Animal Care Services

Reiki is an easy-to-use energy therapy that is complementary to both conventional and holistic approaches. Reiki translates from Japanese as “spiritual energy” and is a system of meditative practice that uses mindfulness techniques to help bring the body, mind, and spirit back to harmony and balance. Reiki meditative practices are a wonderful addition to any wellness program.

Why meditate?

Research suggests that meditation helps people to manage health conditions such as anxiety, cancer, depression, heart disease, pain, and more.

A recent study entitled “Integrative Reiki for Cancer Patients: A Program Evaluation,” concluded that Reiki may “activate the relaxation response.” (Fleisher et al., *Integrative Cancer Therapies*, 2014, Vol. 13(1) 62-67.)

Meditation brings you to a peaceful, balanced state of mind, emotion and physical being. This peacefulness will ripple out! We call this the “Reiki ripple effect”: when we find peace of mind and heart through meditation, then healing, contentment, transformation, and renewal will follow. This can happen not only for us, but also for animals and people around us.

The Shelter Animal Reiki Association (SARA) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit, which I cofounded in 2008 with Leah D’Ambrosio to bring Reiki training and treatments to shelter and sanctuary animals. SARA now has over 400 members worldwide and is endorsed by over 40 animal organizations. SARA supports wellness through its Reiki programs in so many ways, and I’d like to share four main ways below.

1. Reiki helps animals build trust with humans again.

Because many rescued animals come from abuse and/or neglect, finding a way to help them to trust people again is crucial to their healing progress.

SARA Vice President Leah D’Ambrosio remembers a very special experience with a mare named Angel at Pregnant Mare Rescue (PMR) in Northern California:

“Angel was a mare rescued from slaughter by PMR with her new foal. Unfortunately, she had tripped and fallen and was extremely head shy. For a whole week, the founder of PMR had tried without success to take her halter off.

SARA Practitioner Kim Slowick and I visited PMR one day and went out into the field to offer Angel Reiki. One of the main teachings of SARA is that animals always lead the way with treatments, so we weren't sure if Angel would even accept Reiki. However, Angel's response was amazing. Within five minutes, Angel approached Kim, stood nearby, lowered her head, and sighed. Kim reached out to her, and Angel smelled her hand and relaxed further. Kim and I continued to offer Reiki to her for about forty minutes. At the end of the treatment, the founder came into the pasture, gently approached Angel, and was able to easily and immediately slide the halter off Angel's head! We knew allowing Angel to lead her own treatment made all the difference in her trust. What an honor to share the Reiki space with Angel and witness her acceptance and transformation!"

2. Reiki helps animals get adopted.

When animals are in shelter environments, they experience an extreme amount of stress. This stress results in behaviors such as aggression, fear, or depression that may not be attractive to potential adopters. One of the amazing gifts of Reiki is the inner transformation it creates in animals displaying stress behaviors. This is because Reiki creates a strong and peaceful space so that animals can release their stress and get back in touch with their true essence. Once they remember who they are, their sweet spirits can shine through again so that potential adopters can see who they really are. Then it's only a matter of time until love finds them their forever home. SARA Practitioner Lori Amdam offers Reiki at the Nanaimo SPCA in Canada and tells this story of Reiki transformation:

"Lucy was a tiny abandoned kitten that was the only one in her litter to be rescued. Staff hand-fed her, and from the beginning, Lucy was feisty and spirited, to say the least. She would bite, scratch, hiss, and spit at anyone who touched her. No one could imagine that Lucy would be adoptable, and staff asked if Reiki might help her. Lucy participated in seven Reiki sessions, and for the first six times, she would sit facing away from the practitioner, taking every opportunity to bite and scratch. Partway into the seventh Reiki session, we realized that Lucy had not tried to bite or scratch once. After a few minutes, Lucy turned to face the practitioner, making eye contact for the first time. Then she stretched out and relaxed. Lucy seemed ready to let Reiki help her find her center.

For the two days following, staff noted that Lucy was no longer biting or scratching. The following weekend, she was adopted by a family who fell in love with her on first meeting. That was several months ago, and Lucy's forever home reports that she is a gentle, playful, and happy cat."

3. Reiki helps animals through transitions.

BrightHaven founders Gail and Richard Pope often speak of how Reiki has transformed the hospice experience. BrightHaven is a senior and special needs animal sanctuary and hospice in Northern California. Since learning Reiki and using it to help with their care during animal hospice, they report that all of the deaths they have witnessed have been extremely peaceful. They now consider Reiki to be one of the most important ingredients to a successful animal hospice program.

"BrightHaven has experienced miraculous events when we have found the perfect balance of different healing modalities, including the strong force of energy healing. Reiki has allowed us to form a closer communication with the animals and to involve us more directly in their healing and transition."

—Gail Pope

SARA Teacher Tina Read, based in the UK, shares a Reiki experience from the Tree of Life for Animals Sanctuary (TOLFA) in India:

"I was blessed to have the opportunity to spend time with two tiny puppies. Their siblings had passed on, and they were both [doing] quite poorly despite the best possible care around the clock. As I sat with them, they stared at me, and it felt as though they were looking into my soul. There was so much love in those eyes, and I could feel it being beamed at me on all levels. We spent time in the Reiki space, and as always, I detached from outcome. It was very peaceful and full of compassion. When I finished, the smaller of the two pups gazed at me, and I felt so much love. To be honest, it was overwhelming, the loving power this little puppy had. He seemed to know we would not meet again, but there was such a feeling that everything was perfect. So much peace surrounded us all.

The next day this little angel had passed on, but his little brother was still alive.

This little boy could move to get water but mainly lay down. When I connected with him, I sensed he had a sore tummy. He could still manage to wag his little tail after the Reiki, and he was so gentle and sweet. When I arrived the next morning, I was delighted to see the little puppy looking much brighter on his blanket. When he got up and came over to me, I felt the most joyful feeling. We shared Reiki again, and I was very aware of his siblings as little puppy angels all around him. It was a wonderful reminder of how we are always connected through love and are never really separated."

4. Reiki helps shelter and sanctuary staff/volunteers learn meditation practices for coping with on-the-job stress.

Burnout and high turnover rates among shelter and sanctuary staff are an ever-present threat due to the brutal daily realities they have to face. To help with this very difficult issue, SARA Teachers are available to train interested shelter/sanctuary staff and volunteers in simple meditative practices to help them to stay grounded and peaceful, even in the most chaotic situations. This training has been a transformative and life-changing support to shelter and sanctuary staff who practice Reiki.

SARA Teacher Kelly McDermott-Burns shares how Reiki has helped her cope with the stresses of her shelter volunteer work at Rutland County Humane Society in Vermont:

"I have been volunteering Reiki at the Rutland County Humane Society, a SARA shelter for over five years now. I am fortunate to be working in a wonderful shelter with caring staff and a clean environment. The experience has been so incredibly enriching for me personally and for my work with animals in my private practice. Being able to look my fears of encountering anger, sadness, and loss right in the face and to be of service to the animals regardless has taught me patience and compassion.

My personal meditation practice has been the most important element in this work. Without Reiki supporting me, it would be incredibly difficult to walk into RCHS and not absorb some of the pain and sadness I encounter there. Reiki keeps me grounded and opens my heart to have a deeper understanding of compassion. Not just for the animals, but also for the people that have left them there. I am learning all the time about nonjudgment, one of the hardest lessons for me in this work.

I didn't find all this out right away, of course. I struggled in the beginning with anger and sadness. I wanted to save everyone! I was fearful that some would never make it to a good home. I checked the logs every week to see who went home and had mixed feelings when my favorites left. I wanted them to go home but I also wanted them for me. My own fear of abandonment came up over and over again. Whew! So much to learn! Staying diligent with my practice helped me to move through all that. This isn't to say that some days I don't cry over an animal's fate. It only means that I can see a bigger picture—that I can gain some insight into living a fully compassionate life without falling apart."

All in all, when working with shelter and sanctuary animals, it is the meditative space of Reiki that is so transformational. It sounds so simple, yet it is so profound. By simply relaxing, being quiet, breathing, and having a heartfelt intention to help another being, you create a peaceful space. In this space, all healing possibility exists.

I invite you to learn more about how Reiki can support you in your work with animals who need help. SARA has created a book, *The Animal Reiki Handbook: Finding Your Way With Reiki in Shelter and Sanctuaries*, to help prospective shelter Reiki volunteers. SARA Teachers are available to teach animal Reiki to interested organizations, educational institutions, and veterinarians, as well as speak on topics related to animal Reiki. Please visit www.shelteranimalreikiassociation.org for more information.