Our emotions surrounding animals start with our interactions with them during childhood, or the relationships or experiences we share in later years.

When Elizabeth-Anne Bailey sees a movie in which a beloved animal dies, her heart breaks as she remembers her own pets who have passed on. “When a pet dies, it always feels as if a family member has passed away,” says Bailey. “I feel very emotional and overwhelmed with such a loss. Not having your best friend shadowing you or being together anymore is a great sadness that you can only understand if you have lost a pet.”

Bailey has very strong feelings towards animals and reacts with deep emotion if faced with a cruelty or abuse situation on social media. She says her four siblings all care very deeply about animals and suffer extreme grief at the loss of a pet.

Humanity, childhood experiences and culture

In his book Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat, anthrozoologist Hal Herzog explores the paradigm of the human-animal relationship. He asks a pertinent question: “Why is it so hard to think straight about animals?”

Why are some animals showered with love, others treated with disdain and others relegated to the dinner plate? Even those of us who love our pets deeply and provide them with the best care possible may dislike certain animals or have a deep-seated fear or phobia of them.

Kim Kissman, a clinical psychologist and chairlady of the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Institute of South Africa (EAPISA), says although there are psychological reasons for how we respond to or perceive animals, a predominant reason is related to our upbringing and how animals were viewed in our childhood homes. This is behaviour we learned by observing our parents, family and friends in their interaction with animals. Some perceptions are also defined by culture or what is considered socially acceptable.

Like the Bailey siblings, many people develop a deep bond with their animals. In some instances, the relationship shared with an animal companion may be deeper than those shared with other humans. “On the one hand some people are generally more emotional than others, not just regarding animals but life in general, and then you have those who have developed an intense love for animals – the reason why they react so emotionally,” says Kissman. “Some people who have poor self-esteem or social skills tend to lean more towards animals, as they don’t judge as humans do. This may also be the case if a person has been deeply hurt by other people and no longer trusts people. Animals accept you just as you are, unconditionally!”

Some people have a bond with animals that isn’t of a personal nature. They believe that animal life is sacred and that animals should not be owned, used by humans or eaten as food. They may join animal rights groups to protest against the use of animals in testing laboratories or the culling of animals. Emotions may be so strong that otherwise peaceful individuals may resort to violence to let animals out of cages at laboratories or universities.

Love: a powerful emotion

In some human-animal relationships, the lines become blurred as the animal takes on the role of surrogate child. These pets are often smothered in human expressions of love like kissing and hugging. Some extremes include dressing up the pet in outfits or letting the animal ride in a baby pram.

Kim Kissman, a clinical psychologist and horse specialist, says her own pets tolerate being hugged, as she has conditioned them to do so. “Hugging is primate-based behaviour,” says Kissman. “It is usually regarded by canines or felines as a form of entrapment. Wearing outfits that change the ‘outline’ of the animal can be met with anything from slight suspicion to full-blown terror, depending on the socialisation history of the pet, so I would rather leave dressing up to humans and let them enjoy the outdoors, while working on problems or challenges. The psychologist and horse specialist will observe the horse’s body language to gain insight into what the person is thinking and feeling, something the horse exactly mirrors.

“Horses don’t lie and don’t accept incongruent behaviour, so being in the presence of a horse during therapy does not allow the person to hide their feelings,” says Kissman. “If they

“DID YOU KNOW?”

A fear of dogs is called cynophobia and a fear of cats is called ailurophobia or gatophobia.

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visits in the Durban area. Volunteers will visit hospitals or old-age facilities to allow residents to interact with the companion animals.

“It is always important as a volunteer to establish the comfort of those we visit, especially for those approached in their private rooms,” says Dr Tucker. “It is an absolute privilege to witness these moments of interaction. Most of the time, few words are spoken, but simply smiles or tears of appreciation are observed. These signs are particularly powerful when people have speech difficulties or other impairments that may impact communication. People may also reminisce about their own animal companions, which often results in a mix of joy and sadness. It is disappointing when residents do not want to engage with the dogs or cats, but we are fully respectful of that decision.”

Having witnessed these interactions as a professional, Dr Tucker says that from her experience, “there are more similarities than differences in how people respond to the PAT animals. “I do note some interesting reactions in terms of gender stereotypes,” says Dr Tucker. “For one, I have seen first-hand how men and boys tend to ‘drop their guard’ around animals, where they start to respond in a more open and caring way and become more communicative with the people around them.”

A lack of education sometimes causes unintentional neglect

Unintentional neglect

Just as many animals are loved and cared for by dedicated guardians, others are subjected to unspoken abuse and cruelty—even death—at the hands of humans. Karin Botes, a social worker in private practice, has worked with the SPCA in several animal abuse cases. Botes says that this may be due to someone not having the financial resources to care for the pet anymore, or emotional trauma where they are barely able to look after themselves properly, or the person suffering from cognitive decline and being unable to look after the animal correctly.

The latter is a situation that may occur with elderly pet owners. Botes explains that an elderly person may refuse to move to a care facility because their pets are not allowed and they do not want to give them up. Sadly, the pet may end up suffering with a number of health issues because of the person’s inability to cope with living independently anymore and to care for themselves or their animals.

In conclusion

Animal lovers like ourselves, reports of abuse and neglect or the exploitation of animals may draw out strong emotions. We can channel this to assist welfare organisations to care for abandoned or abused animals— to give of our time or resources to assist them in their mammal task. We can also make sure that our own pets are properly cared for and loved. Jessica Prinsloo says that she believes if our pets could share anything with us, it would be a plea to learn to speak their language. “Our pets have become masters at interpreting our actions and intentions, but we humans are failing miserably by comparison at returning the favour,” says Prinsloo. “Learning how to properly read a pet’s body language and behaviour will prevent a myriad of risks, from illness to aggression to unintentional acts of abuse, which will ultimately improve the human-animal relationship.”

WHY DO PEOPLE HURT ANIMALS?

“People who hurt animals intentionally are probably suffering from a serious untreated mental health illness.” – Karin Botes, a social worker in private practice.

CAT SUPERSTITIONS

Cats feature in a number of superstitions across countries and cultures. Many of these beliefs cause a deep-rooted fear of cats or even outright hatred. However, not all cat superstitions are negative: in some cultures cats are revered and are believed to bring good luck. Superstitions around cats are often tied to changes in the weather or bad or good luck.

An even darker, more sinister character may lurk in the shadows—the person who will harm or kill to intimidate others or for thrill-seeking. “It is my professional opinion that people who hurt animals intentionally are probably suffering from a serious untreated mental health illness,” says Botes. “It is my professional opinion that people who hurt animals intentionally are probably suffering from a serious untreated mental health illness.”

“...and if you are not properly educated about the effects of their abusive actions, the negative behaviour will cease,” says Botes.

Much of how we treat animals stems from our childhood homes.

Warning! Not for sensitive readers

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Purposeful pain and suffering

On the other side of the coin are people who would purposefully inflict pain and suffering on an animal. The abuse may take place over a short period of time or longer periods, and there is a definite intention to harm. The abuser may be a young teenager who doesn’t understand the severity of their actions or someone with poor emotional intelligence or intelligence in general. “I would like to believe, especially in younger abusers, that as soon as they are properly educated and informed about the effects of their abusive actions, the negative behaviour will cease,” says Botes.

Kim Kidson says if a person has been hurt by another person and does not have the capacity or insight to work through their emotions or experiences more appropriately or effectively, they may take their frustrations and hurt out on ‘something’ below them in the ‘hierarchy’ of life. “The inappropriate behaviour may also have been learnt through observing others,” says Kidson. “Or the animal may have hurt them somehow and they are protecting themselves, or sadly ‘paying him back’.”

Prinsloo says that children with conduct disorder are known to hurt animals and even kill them without showing any signs of remorse.

In conclusion

For animal lovers like ourselves, reports of abuse and neglect or the exploitation of