



Lending a Flipper

Dolphins make a splash with a mystifying health modality.

By Jessica Ridenour



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There are many mysteries in our universe that remain unsolved: the downfall of the dinosaurs, life on other planets and how a single sock can disappear in the dryer. Why Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) is beneficial for treating a host of disorders—including autism, physical and mental disabilities, post-traumatic stress, spine and brain injuries, anxiety and depression—might be another one of those unsolved enigmas, but that doesn't make it any less relevant for the true believers who deem that these friendly, super-smart mammals have the power to ease what ails you.

Humans' fascination with dolphins' intellect and innocent playfulness dates back to the time of Aristotle, who was the first scientist to study cetaceans (dolphins, whales and porpoises). In the 1950s, Dr. John Lilly studied communication between humans and dolphins. In the 60s, the US Navy launched its Marine Mammal Program, in which dolphins were trained to locate mines, perform underwater surveillance (thanks to fin-mounted cameras), bring equipment to divers and more. Cetaceans' potential impact on human well-being entered the picture in the 70s, when Dr. Betsy Smith first introduced the idea of dolphin therapy. Today, the dolphin allure endures, with DAT centers located around the world.

One such center is Island Dolphin Care (www.islanddolphinscare.org) in Key Largo, Florida. This nonprofit group offers intensive dolphin therapy sessions for special-needs kids, including those with life-threatening conditions and long-term, chronic physical, mental or emotional disabilities.

Accompanied by a therapist, children at the center can interact with dolphins from a platform or enter the water for one-on-one play sessions with the helpful creatures. Often used in conjunction with human-assisted therapy, dolphin swims can help children who may struggle in everyday life to suddenly feel empowered, confident and free.

"It's a recreational, motivational and educational experience," says program manager Pete Hoagland. "We see some kids have major breakthroughs. I would say at the very least the kids have a remarkable experience and I would say in most cases the kids in the programs move in one way or another towards a positive outcome, whatever their challenge might've been." Hoagland, whose wife Deena is a therapist and executive director of the organization, compares the program to other animal therapy modalities, such as equestrian therapy, but notes that floating in the water with a dolphin is likely easier for a severely impaired child than riding a horse.

The Hoaglands were no strangers to the benefits of DAT even before founding IDC. After their son, Joe, was born with a heart defect and was left paralyzed on his left side by a stroke at age three, his parents took him to swim with the dolphins as often as possible. He is now a college-age adult with few remaining symptoms of his stroke.

"We've seen some remarkable things here, using the excitement and motivation of the dolphins, which is a powerful tool," says Pete, "and we do see kids say their first words or take their first steps, or change the behavior that was not productive." But he's quick to add that there is no "miracle" to be found here. "We absolutely do not suggest that dolphins can cure or heal," he says.

"There's no hard science or research that would allow us to promote it, and so we don't; but animals and kids in general have something of a natural connection."

The Dolphin is IN

Children aren't the only ones who benefit from dolphins. Florida-based nurse and bodywork practitioner Corinna Soumerai has been swimming with dolphins, both in the wild and in captivity, for over 25 years. For her, it's more of a spiritual, personal encounter. "When I had my first experience with a dolphin, I wept," she reveals. "The connection I had by looking into the dolphin's eyes was so deep for me; I felt a sense of love, a sense of being home...like I was with an enlightened entity." Visiting with a psychotherapist was unfulfilling for Soumerai; instead, she would swim with dolphins, returning from each swim with a permanent smile on her face, profound emotional healing and deep sleep afterward. "I liked the results I got with a bigger being or a

bigger force of nature," she says. "I think that the cetaceans are here to remind us that we were once connected and are still connected to nature."

While the jury is still officially out as to why DAT is such a powerfully effective therapy for some patients, theories abound. One such hypothesis is based on dolphins' use of sonar and what is called echolocation. Dolphins use echolocation to navigate, find food and communicate with other dolphins. They send out a signal—a clicking sound to us humans—and then the signal bounces back, letting them know what lies ahead—in essence "seeing" with sound.

Through echolocation, dolphins can allegedly detect pregnancy, as well as tumors or other illnesses in humans. Dolphins' echolocation is also said to induce changes in a person's cellular membranes and body tissue, creating healing and deep relaxation—and people say they can actually feel it happening. The physiological effects are similar to that of music therapy. Some simply believe that swimming with dolphins is fun and that the unconditional love of dolphins imparts a feeling of joy in humans; others even believe that dolphins are extraterrestrials or angels sent to Earth to save our species.

Regardless of the mechanisms behind DAT's benefits, these incredibly intelligent, remarkably sensitive creatures have much to share with humankind. Swimming with dolphins can be a soothing, otherworldly experience that distracts adults from the problems in their lives, fills physically challenged children with excitement and a zest for life...and quite possibly stimulates healing by connecting humans with our true natural origins. All it takes is a life vest and an open mind.