

Hugs, drugs and choices—helping traumatised animals

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Interspecies relationships can help traumatised animals form healthy attachments. Credit: Sugarshine animal sanctuary, CC BY-SA

Rosie, like a real-life [Babe](#), ran away from an organic piggery when she was only a few days old. She was found wandering in a car park, highly agitated, by a family who took her home and made her their live-in pet. However, after three months they could no longer keep her.

She was relocated to the [Sugarshine animal sanctuary](#), outside Lismore

in New South Wales. Kelly Nelder, Sugarshine's founder and a mental health nurse, described her as "highly strung" and "needy". It's not surprising that Rosie, after the loss of two primary care attachments, was unable to bond with the other pigs; she was traumatised.

I met Rosie when I visited Sugarshine, investigating the similarities between human and animal [trauma](#). I spent 20 years as a clinical and forensic psychologist, but as an undergraduate I studied zoology.

My zoology lecturers told us not to anthropomorphise – that is, not to project human qualities, intentions and emotions onto the animals we studied. But now there is a growing recognition of animals' inner life and their experience of psychopathology, including trauma.

At Sugarshine, traumatised animals are given freedom to find solitude or company as they wish. Interspecies relationships are encouraged, like a baby goat being cared for by a male adult pig, or a rooster who sleeps alongside a goat.

Rosie has been at Sugarshine for a few months now and is more settled, roaming its gullies, farmyards and shelters, although according to Kelly she's still anxious. She prefers the company of the bobby calves, wedging herself between them as they lie on the ground, getting skin-to-skin contact, falling asleep, and beginning the reattachment process.

Understanding trauma in animals

I first made the connection between human and animal trauma on a visit to [Possumwood Wildlife](#), a centre outside Canberra that rehabilitates injured kangaroos and abandoned joeys, wallabies and wombats. There I met its founders, economics professor Steve Garlick and his partner Dr Rosemary Austen, a GP.

When joeys were first brought into their care, Steve told me, they were "inconsolable" and "dying in our arms", even while physically unharmed, with food and shelter available to them.

But this response made sense once they recognised the joey's symptoms as reminiscent of [post-traumatic stress disorder in humans](#): intrusive symptoms, avoidant behaviour, disturbed emotional states, heightened anxiety and hypervigilance.

Researchers at the University of Western Australia have developed non-invasive means for measuring stress and mood in animals and are now working with sheep farmers to [improve the well-being of their animals](#). PTSD has been identified in [elephants](#), [dogs](#), [chimpanzees](#) and [baboons](#), for example.

Safe, calm and caring

To rehabilitate from trauma, humans and animals need to feel safe and away from cues that trigger the individual's threat response, deactivating the sympathetic nervous system (the fight-flight response). They also need a means of self-soothing, or to gain soothing from another, activating the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest, digest and calm response).

Progress, from then on, requires the development of a secure relationship with at least one other accepting and caring person or animal. Often, this "other" is someone new. In mammals, including us, this activates our [affiliative system](#): our strong desire for close interpersonal relationships for safety, soothing and stability. We enter a calmer, receptive state of being so that the reattachment process can begin.

Possumwood uses [three stages](#) for trauma rehabilitation. Young animals are first kept in a dark, quiet environment indoors to reduce noises or sounds that might trigger their fight-flight response. Here they have the opportunity to develop new kin friendships of their own choosing.



Rosie the anxious pig likes to sleep with bobby calves at Sugarshine animal sanctuary. Credit: Sugarshine animal sanctuary, CC BY

Sedatives (Diazepam and Fluphenazine) are judiciously used in the early stages. Then, the principal carer spends as much time as possible feeding and caressing them to build a new bond.

Kangaroos are social animals, unable to survive in the wild unless part of a mob. So joeys are moved next to a large garage, and then finally to an

outdoor yard, gradually being exposed to more kangaroos and creating social bonds. Once a mob grows to 30 or so healthy [animals](#), they are released into the wild together.

The fundamentals are the same

The similarity between animal and human trauma is not surprising. Mammalian brains (birds also appear to experience trauma) share the principal architecture involved in experiencing [trauma](#). The primates, and certainly humans, have a greater capacity for cognitive reflection, which in my clinical experience can be both a help and a hindrance.

My observations of trauma rehabilitation at Sugarshine and Possumwood emphasises the universal fundamentals:

- A sense of agency (freedom and control over their choices)
- To feel safe
- To develop a trusting, caring bond with at least one other creature
- Reintegration into the community at the trauma sufferer's own discretion.

For those experiencing social isolation and shame around their trauma – such as returned soldiers or the victims of domestic violence – these principles could not be more pertinent. And for our non-human cousins, like Rosie, we would do well to remember that they do feel, and they do hurt.

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