

Cute-animal pics as therapeutic as chocolate, sex

Cute animals arouse the same pleasure in humans as chocolate, sex, psychoactive drugs

BY MISTY HARRIS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MARCH 9, 2009



A husky sled-dog puppy sits in the snow 40km outside of Moscow in Chulkovo. Members of the Concord Dog Lovers Club held a training session for an upcoming mushing competition.

Photograph by: Dmitry Kostyukov, AFP/Getty Images

The digital pest of puppies, kittens and other cuter-than-thou animals spamming your inbox is about to become a full-blown plague, say experts who predict people will soon be sharing these images and videos more than ever.

Studies suggest the sight of a cute animal can stimulate the same neurological pleasure centres as those aroused by chocolate, sex and psychoactive drugs. Because humans are hardwired to make themselves feel good, social scientists say seeking out such images is becoming a matter of emotional survival as the country slips deeper into economic malaise.

"We search for this sort of thing during times when we're not getting smiles from a hell of a lot of other places," says Stanley Coren, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. "It's the reason why during the Depression, we saw so many zany films with a comedic edge."

In the last month, for instance, "Bizkit the sleepwalking dog" has become a viral sensation on YouTube and other video sites, with 5.2 million people having watched the endearing pooch chase an invisible cat into a very real wall. And since January, footage of a deer and cat snuggling to the soundtrack of

Louis Armstrong has been shared 11.1 million times.

"You get two bangs for your emotional buck from the same video," explains Coren — one when you watch it, another when you share it with others.

In the aftermath of Australia's recent deadly wildfires, a koala bear captured on video being bottle-fed by a firefighter became an instant global star, and a symbol of hope in a tragedy that claimed more than 200 lives.

Harvard alumna Caroline Adams Miller, who specializes in positive psychology, explains this response as a biological imperative. When things get bad, she says self-regulation kicks in to restore willpower any way possible, with vulnerable animals becoming the cognitive equivalent of a "teaspoon of sugar."

"In order to flourish, whether in a marriage, at work or in any other type of environment, you need three positive comments or interactions for every one negative," says Adams Miller, author of *Creating Your Best Life*. "If you listen to the news, we're so far below three-to-one it's staggering."

Playwright Prince Gomolvilas recently cut back his media consumption for that very reason. The Bamboo Nation blogger is instead focusing on his cat Pork Chop, whose Internet antics have earned the fat feline repeated mentions in *Entertainment Weekly* and his own Facebook fan page.

"As a means of escape and as a very real means of dealing with dark times, I turn to making more Pork Chop videos — and a bunch of people turn to watching them, and videos like them," says Gomolvilas. "In terms of keeping your sanity, 'lolcats' beat public radio any day."

Companies such as Telus, Geico and Samsung leverage this phenomenon, too, tickling consumers' neurological pleasure centres with commercials that feature the zoological equivalent of a cooing baby: meerkats, geckos, bunnies, hamsters and chicks.

People who aren't warmed by such images can still get a lift from other people's enjoyment of them. According to a recent study in the *British Medical Journal*, a happy friend that lives within 1.6 kilometres can raise your odds of being cheerful by 25 per cent. The happiness of a friend of a friend boosts your chances by 9.8 per cent, and the happiness of a friend of a friend of a friend lifts them by 5.6 per cent.

Kim Blank, a professor of cultural studies at the University of Victoria, calls it the "good hug of Wi-Fi sociability."

"Despite (animals') ever presence, they remain magical creatures upon which we bestow our values, habits, and personalities. To laugh at them is to laugh at ourselves," says Blank. "Technology allows us to be the purveyor of both the banal and the sublime, even if it is just a 15-second clip of a sleeping cat falling, once again, off the top of a television."

mharris@canwest.com

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