

The Power of Petting

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HOUSE RABBIT SOCIETY



When my husband gives me a hug at the end of the day, he also scratches my back and ends with a quick rub. Ahh! It feels so good, and my lucky bunnies get this treatment every time I pass by. Touch is perhaps the primary way we communicate our love for our animal companions, and we have the power to calm, relax, and even heal through this physical contact. Think of all the opportunities you have to improve your bunny's quality of life by simply fine-tuning your petting. It doesn't necessarily take more time, just a little knowledge and desire. Although there exist many schools of thought, most touch philosophies have some main principles in common that you can practice with your friends.

Do unto others

Most of us wouldn't dream of handling another person without his consent, but we do this to animals all the time. Next time you approach a rabbit, consider that he might not appreciate your attention right now. Say hello and ask permission before entering his space.

Acknowledge his response and respect his decision if he tells you that now is not the right time. Tell him what you intend to do and why, how long it will last, that he will be safe, and that you will return him to his space when you are done. If the situation requires that you pick him up when he doesn't want it, explain why you have no choice and ask his cooperation. Believe that he understands you and that you can understand him.

Be gentle

Try this experiment: Rest the fingers of one hand on the back of the other. Softly stroke the skin a few times, then repeat the motion firmly. The soft stroke is very soothing, isn't it, while the firm stroke creates a very different feel. Although deep massage has its uses, a light touch will be less threatening and can succeed just as well in most situations. By simply running your fingers along the body in the direction of the fur, you can feel bumps and hollows, heat or cold, tension or sensitivity. A light stroke can tell you things about your friend's health and relax the little guy at the same time. You can repeat your soft movements over a troubled area or just rest your hand on the spot. Chances are that the warmth, energy, and love you transmit will help soothe that sore area!

Trust yourself

I know what you're thinking. How in the world can you, an ordinary human, know what's right and what's wrong for your bunn? Trust yourself! Watch Bunny while you stroke and note how he reacts. Does he flinch when you touch his tail? Does he hunker down when you stroke his nose? Does he hop away when your hand nears his paw? OK. Now you know some important spots, and it's time to consider why these areas trigger these responses. Is this his usual reaction or something new? Is he nervous that he'll be picked up or has he injured himself? If it's nerves, we can work on that. If it's an injury, it's probably time to call the vet. See, you know more than you thought.

Recognize that it takes time

You know that your friend loves to have his ears rubbed, but he can't bear a hand near his hindquarters. So start with what he likes. After greeting him and asking if you can stop in for a visit, gently rub his ears a few times, then continue your stroke over the sensitive area. Quickly return to the safe spot for a few more loves, then stroke the "danger zone" again. If he seems interested, but nervous, try petting with the back of your hand. The rabbit knows that fingers can grab, so by turning your hand, you immediately become less dangerous. By keeping your bunny relaxed and concentrating on the positive feelings, you can slowly attune him to being touched without taking fright. However, remember that fears don't dissipate in one day, and it will take some time before Bunn lets down his guard. Recognize also that your animal can sense your feelings, so if you're nervous, take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Let him know that it's safe.

Remember some key spots

Several healing therapies are based on the ancient Chinese principal of chi. Practices such as acupressure and acupuncture are based on the flow of energy through the body and hold that illnesses are linked to blockages along these energy paths. By releasing the blockages at specific acupressure points, one can heal the body without intrusion. Some very important points exist on either side of the spine, particularly between the shoulder blades, and stroking these areas may help release anxiety, grief, and fear. Yes, it's pretty difficult to get your fingers between the shoulder blades of a four-pound rabbit, but give it a try. Using your pinkie, gently pet the bunny several times along the upper section of the spine. All animals will have different spots to which they respond, but this is a good, general area to start. If he relaxes and starts purring after a few minutes, you have a winner!

Another area to keep in mind is the ear. All the acupressure points in the body are mimicked here, and you may already have noticed that Bunny loves to have his ears rubbed. Start at the base of the ear with your thumb on one side and your index finger on the other. Draw your fingers up to the top of the ear with long strokes that encompass its full length. Repeat these gentle pulls until you've covered the whole area. You've now given your friend a whole

bunny-body-tune-up for the price of an ear rub! Many rabbits who shy away from petting will allow their ears to be stroked, so this may be a good place to build up trust. These strokes are particularly helpful when you have a very sick bunn. Don't hesitate to rush him to the vet if he is gravely injured or in shock, but get someone else to drive you. While you travel, stroke Bunny's ears and cover as much area as you can. Continue until you see the vet, and with some luck, your friend may already be starting to feel better.

A final suggestion comes from the practice of T-Touch. A main principal in this practice is to use movements that the animal doesn't normally feel in order to make him more aware of his body. The core move is a circular petting motion in which you move your fingers clockwise, starting at six o'clock, making a full circle, and continuing for another quarter turn to nine o'clock. Using your thumb as an anchor, lightly move the skin in this clockwise, one and a quarter circle, going only as far as the skin wants to go, then move to a new spot and repeat the stroke. When circling, do not slide your hands over the skin, but keep a gentle pressure so the skin moves with you. This motion seems to stimulate the animal's nervous system, promoting relaxation and healing. Try it next time you give your bunny a love, and you may find you enjoy it as much as he does!

Whether you have a nervous little friend or a rambunctious troublemaker, your companion will appreciate the attention you give him and hopefully respond to your ministrations so that you and he can live a healthier and happier life together. He will recognize your increased sensitivity to his world and reciprocate with greater trust and affection, and for all us rabbit-addicts, there's no greater honor than to be trusted by a bunn. The knowledge that you may be increasing his quality of life is just a bonus. So pet with intent, observe your rabbit's responses, and enjoy this time you have together.

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