



There's no question that cuddly things can make you happier. But sometimes, the power of cute can extend beyond just making you smile. Here's how adorable items are used to lift people's spirit—and change lives for the better.



# Cute TO THE RESCUE



## (TINY) HELPING HOOVES

About once a week, Victoria Nodiff-Netanel loads her crew of mini therapy horses into the back of her van and hits the road. Soon, Pearl, Willow Blue, Liberty Bell, American Valor, Blue Moon, Sweet Louise, and Stormy Blue will be strolling the halls of the Ronald McDonald House in Los Angeles, California, U.S. The horses will stop to see patients, letting kids stroke their soft manes, or wrap them up in big hugs, or lead them down the hallway on leashes. Sometimes, they'll show off with tricks like riding a tiny scooter, playing a keyboard, or "smiling" on command.

## MINI AND MAGICAL

Studies show that being around a cute and cuddly animal can boost your spirits. And for those who are sick or going through tough times, animals can offer a powerful form of therapy. As Victoria's mini horses demonstrate, even tiny therapy animals can make a huge impression. Her crew--part of the California-based non-profit organization Mini Therapy Horses--is so popular that she makes weekly visits to adult hospitals as well as those for children. They're often featured in parades. They visit families who have recently lost a loved one, and Victoria even brings them to college campuses to de-stress students before final exams.



"They have this calming effect, and they are just so cute," says Victoria of her pint-size pets, which are bred to be the size of a large dog. "They're like magical unicorns--people can't believe they are real."

## TINY HORSES, BIG IMPRESSIONS

Mini horses are so appealing, says Victoria because their size makes them accessible and intriguing. Plus, they're very easy to train. "Even if a kid doesn't speak English, he can connect with a mini horse. All you have to do is spin your finger in a circle and they will twirl around," says Victoria. "The horses are so loving. It doesn't matter how old people are--everyone wants to pet them, touch them, and hug them. They may be little, but they have such a huge presence."



## Four Cute Things that Help—and HEAL

### TEACHER'S PET

1 Across the country, puppies are popping up in classrooms as part of their training to become guide dogs for the blind. Not only does the exposure to young kids help the dogs learn to be calm and well-mannered, but students benefit, too: Studies show that having an animal in the classroom may help kids stay on task and become more excited about learning.

### PURRFECT COMPANION

2 These soft kitties meow and purr just like actual cats--no litter box required! Lifelike stuffed animals, the cat robots are used in nursing homes to soothe and provide cuddly company to elderly residents.

### DO-GOODER DOG

3 Norbert, a registered therapy dog, spreads smiles to children sick in the hospital. The tiny mixed-breed--he weighs just 3.5 pounds (1.6 kg)--has been featured in two books and even has a stuffed animal modeled after him.

### HOP TO IT

4 Blossom is so much more than your basic stuffed bunny. Equipped with technology that allows it to react to content in videos, this still-in-development "soft" robot may one day be used as a companion and teaching tool for kids on the autism spectrum.





(Tiny)

# HELPiNG HOOVES

**V**ICTORIA NODIFF-NETANEL and her volunteers load her crew of mini therapy horses into the back of her van and hits the road. Soon, Pearl, Willow Blue, Liberty Bell, American Valor, Blue Moon, Sweet Louise, and Stormy Blue will be strolling the halls of the Ronald McDonald House in Los Angeles and Pasadena, California, U.S.A. The horses will stop to see patients, letting kids stroke their soft manes, or wrap them up in big hugs, or lead them down the hallway on leashes. Sometimes, they'll show off with tricks like standing on hind legs to a Hi Ho Silver command, playing a keyboard, or "smiling" on command.

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How mini horses provide "cute" therapy for kids in need.