

[IMAGE]

The Human-Animal Bond

By Meghan Vivo

If you're an animal lover, it should come as no surprise that pets can be good for your health. As a constant source of enjoyment and faithful companionship, your canine or feline companion can help reduce stress, lower blood pressure and aid in recovery from illness. Given all these benefits, it's no wonder that across the U.S., homes are filled with 74.8 million dogs (39 percent of households) and 90 million cats (36 percent of households).

People all over the world love their pets, often devoting as much time and attention to them as they would a family member. A recent survey of Canadian pet owners revealed that nearly 80 percent of respondents gave their pets holiday or birthday presents and more than 60 percent signed their pets' names on cards or letters. While virtually all pet owners talk to their pets, an astonishing 94 percent spoke to their pets as though they were human, even on the telephone or answering machine.

A woman holding two small terriers. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Good for Your Heart**

The link between mind and body permeates every area of life. Relaxation, meditation and stress management have become accepted tools for reducing blood pressure. Research shows the mere presence of a pet reduces resting heart rate and lowers blood pressure. By some accounts, the reduction in blood pressure is equivalent to eating a low-salt diet or cutting back on alcohol consumption. Since pet owners have measurably lower levels of cholesterol and blood pressure, pet ownership may be one of the best ways to predict the chance of surviving a heart attack.

For most people, stroking a pet or watching fish swim in an aquarium promotes relaxation. In a laboratory study of college students, petting a friendly dog lowered their blood pressure, heart rate and anxiety level. And patients who watched fish in an aquarium in a waiting room before undergoing oral surgery experienced the same reduction in anxiety and discomfort as those who underwent hypnosis prior to surgery.

Better Overall Health

Three young boys with their golden retriever. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark According to researchers, pet owners seem to have better overall health than non-pet owners. A comprehensive survey of more than 11,000 Australians, Chinese and Germans showed that pet owners made 15 percent to 20 percent fewer annual visits to the doctor than non-pet owners. The healthiest group who went to the doctor the least continuously owned a pet; the next healthiest group had obtained a pet for the first time during the study period; and the least healthy groups were people who had never owned a pet or no longer did.

Pets, especially dogs, encourage physical activity, which can boost overall health and wellness and combat depression. A study at Cambridge University found that owning a pet improved general health in as little as one month. Pet owners often are more active because they can walk or run with their dog or play with their cat to burn a few extra calories. Like any enjoyable activity, playing with a dog or cat can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters known for their calming properties. A daily walk with a dog gets you out into the world with other people and animals and encourages exercise, both of which counteract depression.

Pets and Child Development

The bond between a child and their pet is unmistakable. Pets make perfect playmates and sympathetic listeners, but also can improve children's social skills and ability to communicate. A study of 455 schoolchildren between the ages of 11 and 16 revealed that children with pets had a better ability to understand nonverbal communications. In some schools, teachers have introduced pets into the classroom to stimulate the social integration and social competence of the students.

A young woman with her dog and cat. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Children's relationships with pets are unique and different from their relationships with others in their social world. Based on studies of children in diverse family circumstances, it appears that, at least for some, the presence of a pet is immensely beneficial. In many cases, being exposed to a pet helps establish and maintain relationships with peers, especially in grade and high school. By providing faithful and nonjudgmental companionship, pets provide psychological and psychosocial stability to their owners, which can result in better health.

Research suggests children with pets also have higher self-esteem and function better emotionally than those without pets. A five-year study of 600 children ages 3 to 18 revealed that children with pets who are slow learners or whose parents have divorced cope better with life than those without a pet. Another study found that owning a pet results in better attendance at school and less absenteeism due to illness. Owning a pet

also teaches children about responsibility, mutual trust and the importance of daily care.

Many parents worry about their children developing allergies from their furry friend, especially in a family that is allergy-prone. However, evidence suggests pets actually play an important role in building up a child's immune system. Children who live with a cat or dog in their first years of life have a lower incidence of hay fever and asthma and are less likely to develop animal-related allergies. Recent studies also suggest that a child's immune system in a pet-owning family is more stable than a child from a non-pet-owning family, boosting the child's ability to fight illness.

Pets and Seniors

According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, seniors who own pets have better overall physical and mental health than those who don't. Pet ownership has been shown to combat depression among older people, particularly those experiencing personal stress without adequate social support (such as bereaved people without a human support network). At a minimum, pet ownership may reduce the need for medical care for noncritical problems. Pet owners feel needed and responsible for the survival, health and well-being of their animal. By shifting the focus away from ourselves, pets help us feel connected to a larger world.

An older man hugs his dog to him. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Many hospitals and retirement homes offer patients animal therapy programs, with pet-owning volunteers taking time to bring their dogs to entertain and comfort patients. Introducing animals in institutional settings encourages seniors to smile and talk more, reach out to people and objects, and stay alert. While elderly people often are isolated or avoided, evidence suggests they benefit from a companion dog, not only for the companionship itself but because both friends and strangers are more likely to socially engage with the person with a dog present. Research also strongly suggests pet programs produce greater psychosocial benefits than other types of therapies such as friendly visitor programs, arts and craft programs, and conventional psychotherapy.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

Beyond children and seniors, the therapeutic use of pets as companions has gained popularity in recent years for a wide variety of patients - people with AIDS, cancer or mental illness, prison inmates, and many others. Therapy animals visit these individuals, who are encouraged to pet, interact and play with them. Often,

scientists and researchers report immediate improvement in physical health and mental well-being from animal-assisted therapy. All types of animals have been used for therapeutic purposes, ranging from the familiar (dogs and cats) to the exotic (dolphins and elephants).

A woman holds her kitten to her face. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark One of the most popular and effective types of pet therapy is equine-assisted psychotherapy (therapeutic horseback riding).

"Therapeutic riding" enhances both the physical and psychological well-being of individuals because it incorporates horseback riding skills and gymnastic exercises for emotional, cognitive and sensorimotor benefits. Patients with movement disorders learn better posture, balance, mobility and function.

Another common animal-assisted therapy uses dogs to rehabilitate prisoners. One project in Oregon showed that 100 percent of teenage offenders following a dog therapy program did not return to the correctional system. The troubled teens, who exhibited behavioral problems such as resistance to authority and poor social manners, were paired with problem dogs to learn acceptable behavior from each other. Another project matches inmates with dogs in a 10-week course that teaches the dogs basic commands and house-training. While human-human interactions can be complex, stressful and unpredictable, human-animal connections provide a constant source of comfort and acceptance. The inmates forge close bonds with their dogs and gain experience caring for others while learning responsibility, patience, compassion and a strong work ethic.

Is a Pet Right for You?

A couple pose with their boxer. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Although dogs and cats are the most common choices, a therapeutic benefit is available with any type of animal - birds, fish, rodents, reptiles - as long as it is of interest to you. The most important criterion is that you choose a pet that suits your temperament, living space and lifestyle.

In recent years, cats have replaced dogs as America's most popular pet, no doubt due to the fact that cats are easier to care for. While dogs have to be walked outside, cats are content to lounge indoors. If you have children under six years old, an adult cat is a better choice than a kitten. Cats can live to around 20 years of age so be sure you're ready for a long-term commitment.

A dog is an excellent choice if you have lots of space and time to exercise and play. Dogs require significant interaction with people and depending on the breed, may need obedience training and regular grooming. If

someone in your household is allergic to dogs, there are many breeds known for their hypoallergenic qualities, such as the Greyhound, Lhasa Apso, Poodle, Yorkshire Terrier, and many others.

Small mammals like rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs are convenient because they generally live in a cage or self-contained habitat. But like cats and dogs, they can require a great deal of human attention and maintenance. Because they can be fragile and difficult to handle, these pets are best for children ages 8 and up.

A woman hugs and pets her cat. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark
Birds and fish, though slightly less cuddly and lovable, can make ideal pets. Birds are intelligent, sociable and amusing companions. They can require substantial human interaction, including time outside the cage, and can be messy and difficult to handle for children under 8 years of age. Fish in an aquarium can be relaxing and fascinating to watch, but be prepared - their care and maintenance can be time-consuming with regular tank cleaning, daily feedings and upkeep.

Like every person, every pet is unique. Be sure to choose carefully as your new friend may be with you for many years. Here are a few important considerations when choosing a pet:

- A young girl hugs her golden retriever to her. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Think before you buy.** Avoid adopting or buying a pet on a whim. Pet shops are prime targets for impulse buying. Go home and sleep on it before taking the leap.
- **Shop around.** Take the time to learn about the kind of pet you are considering buying - size, activity level, nutritional needs, common health issues - before making a long-term commitment. A new pet can change the structure of a family and should be acceptable to all family members.
- **Visit your local humane society and animal rescue organizations.** Walk through your local humane society or rescue organization and interact with some of the animals. Try to observe each one's positive and negative points and see how comfortable you are on a one-on-one basis.
- **Find a pet that suits your lifestyle.** Are you a night owl or a morning person? Some pets spend much of the day asleep and are active at night. Do you work long hours? While some pets get lonely by themselves, others are happy to be left alone. Do you have children? Are they old enough not to be a threat to the pet you choose? If you spend significant time traveling, who will care for the pet while you are away?
- **Find a pet that fits your home environment.** Do you live in a house or apartment? Do you have a

backyard? Is it fenced? How will your neighbors feel about this new pet?

- A woman poses with her bulldog. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Analyze why you want a pet.** What purpose will this pet serve in your life? If you'd like your pet to be like a family member, you probably want a dog or cat. Do you want a pet that is independent or are you hoping to spend hours running or playing with your pet? Cat people tend to have different traits than dog people - choose the wrong one and you may not bond. If you want a cute and cuddly companion, a frog or turtle may not be the right pet for you. If you want to teach your pet tricks and interact with it, an intelligent pet like a dog, cat or ferret might be the right choice.
- **Decide if the timing is right.** Is this a good time in your life to own a pet? If you already have other pets, how will they get along with the new one? How stable are your human relationships? Are you in good health?
- **Consider how long you want your pet around.** How long do you expect your pet to live? Dogs and cats generally live 12-16 years, though many live longer. Tortoises and goldfish can have life spans similar to our own. Small parrots live 8-14 years and larger ones 35-60 years, whereas mice are old at two years of age.
- A young girl poses with her cat laying on her back. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Determine if you can meet your pet's needs.** Research online or at the library how much care your pet will need. Be sure you have enough time to properly feed and clean up after it. Pets get bored if they don't get enough attention, which can lead to a variety of unwanted behaviors.
- **Decide how much you want to spend.** Depending on the pet you choose, the costs can really add up. In addition to the initial cost of the pet, you have to budget for a home or cage, high-quality food, toys, veterinary care, grooming and pet sitters.

Pets hold a special place in the lives of their owners. They boost morale and optimism, encourage playfulness and laughter, and satisfy the need to love and be loved. Those who have experienced a brisk walk or game of fetch with the dog or an evening cuddling with a purring cat don't need studies to know that pet ownership is good for the soul. Of course, a pet is a serious responsibility, but with careful planning, the return on your investment can add years of joy to your life.

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