



Rx: Pets!

By Susan Israel

How Our Four-Legged Friends Keep Us Healthy

FEELING BLUE, STRESSED OUT, AND TIED IN KNOTS? Your doctor might want to write a prescription that says "Pet Rover three times a day and call me in the morning." Study after study has found that having a pet has a positive impact on physical and emotional health.

"Who doesn't smile when they see a dog wagging its tail?" says Dr. Robert B. Cohen of Bay Street Animal Hospital in Staten Island. According to Cohen, people in different age groups benefit from pets in different ways. For example, seniors experience less social isolation, as pets provide the opportunity for connectedness.

Take a look at some more astounding stats and studies to support the theory that pets can improve your life...

Canine Therapy

"Pets add a degree of normalcy to a difficult

situation," says Dr. Frank Sileo, a Ridgewood, NJ, psychologist who brings his cairn terrier Ozzie to the office with him most days. Ozzie acts as a "neutralizing object" when children and adults come in for therapy sessions. "He just lies around and makes them feel at ease, and petting him calms them down," says Sileo. The dog is also good for teaching boundaries and empathy

HOW TO BENEFIT FROM PETS IF YOU CAN'T HAVE ONE

When the landlord says "No!" or somebody in the family wheezes at the sight of a wagging tail, but you still want to soak up some of that puppy love, there are several options to ward off pet deprivation.

"Volunteering at an animal shelter or local rescue group is a wonderful way to interact with animals if you can't have one, and you are giving something back to your community as well," says Nikki Moustaki, animal trainer, rescuer, and author of "Parrots for Dummies" and "Pocket Pups." Moustaki also suggests you offer to pet-sit for a friend's cat or dog. "You'll get interaction with a pet and make your friend very happy as well."

skills. When people raise their voices during a session, Ozzie shivers, and Sileo points out the effect their raised voices are having. And Ozzie has given people their voice, too: "I've had selectively mute patients start talking," says Sileo. When children are upset, they will sometimes talk to Ozzie before they talk to Sileo.

"If I've had a rough session with a patient, I'll pet him for comfort, too," says Sileo. It's a win-win situation. "He's just happy he's there, and I get to spend time with my dog."

While it's not common practice for medical doctors to bring pets to the office, Sileo suggests that the presence of animals could minimize "white-coat syndrome," which is when patients are tense and nervous around doctors. This can result in lower blood pressure, heart rate, and anxiety.

A Cure for What Ails You

"When things get tough, people are looking for a feel-good cure, and dogs provide that," says dog trainer Colleen Safford, owner of New York Walk and Train and Far Fetched Acres, a Hudson Valley country retreat for dogs.

Safford observed firsthand how dogs were able to help people heal after 9/11. "We saw a surge in dog ownership. Dogs were the feel-good medicine in a time of trauma. Psychiatrists were pulling in everyday pets (not those specifically trained for service) as part of trauma and post-traumatic stress therapies," she explains. Safford was also a Delta Society Pet Partners Team Evaluator and Instructor. "Everyday dogs and their owners can train and test as a team to become certified as a 'visiting dog team,'" says Safford. "Most Delta Society

teams (the owner and dog) will start off by visiting long term care facilities, hospices and nursing homes. A calm dog brings joy and relaxation



AMAZING PET POWER

- A study conducted at Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine found that the presence of a fish tank in a dining area made it more likely that patients with Alzheimer's would sit and eat instead of wandering.

- Cat owners were found by University of Minnesota researchers to have a significantly lower risk of dying of a heart attack or other cardiovascular disease, including stroke.

- National Institutes of Health research of 240 married couples, half of whom owned a pet, showed that people with pets had a significantly lower heart rate and blood pressure level during psychological and physical stress tests and faster recovery.

- Among pet owners, the lowest reactivity and quickest recovery was observed in the patients who brought their pets with them. Those who brought a friend or a spouse didn't fare as well.

and unconditional love to the sick and elderly – not to mention being a great distraction from being ill."

There are scientific studies to prove it! Petting a dog, especially your own, increases the level of pleasure hormones and lowers the stress hormone cortisol. Oxytocin increases pain thresholds and stimulates positive social interaction. Meg Daley Olmert, a senior fellow at the Center for Health Media and Policy at Hunter College and author of "Made for Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond," cites four separate studies that show that friendly human-dog interaction increases oxytocin in humans. Among the highlights, says Olmert, was a 2009 study by leading oxytocin researcher Uvnas-Moberg, which found a significant increase in blood oxytocin in both dog and owner after 15 minutes of friendly interaction. "And another world-renowned brain researcher, Inga Neumann, recently concluded that the intense social interactions and emotions shared by humans and their pets, especially dogs, are capable of creating powerful beneficial chemical reactions in both."

Liz Keller, director of Glen Wild Animal Rescue in North Branch, NY, used to break out in hives when she was stressed but hasn't since she adopted her American Eskimo, Checks. "When I come home, she sits and relaxes in my lap, and petting her really helps," says Keller.

Chrissy Kelly, a former South Jersey resident who suffered from bipolar disorder, recalls how her dogs made her feel better. "Whenever I cried, Izzie, my PapiPoo (Papillon/Poodle hybrid) would find me immediately and lick my tears away. It was the most comforting thing in the world." 🐾



"Baby Girl" of Brooklyn

When You Shouldn't Own a Pet

You love animals and you'd love to have a pet, but you may not have the dedication, patience, and means to bring a furry friend into your family. A pet can relieve stress, but it can increase stress, too. If you work 24/7 and still want to party afterward, or if your family is always running to soccer matches and recitals and traveling, you may want to hold off.

"Families need to assess how much time they can spend with a pet," says Dr. Sileo. Financial issues have to be evaluated, too; pets need food and grooming and veterinary care. For those determined to have a pet, low-cost clinics and opportunities for food assistance do exist.

Do your homework, urges Keller. Research breeds to find temperaments that mesh with your lifestyle. A compatible four-legged friend can add a smile to your face and possibly years to your life.