



How Pets Comfort Us

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Pets are more than just furry friends and loyal companions. Yes, they tug at our heartstrings, but they also improve our health, both mental and physical, helping us to live longer and happier lives.

Studies over the past 25 years have shown that stroking a dog or cat can lower blood pressure and heart rate and boost levels of the mood-related brain chemicals serotonin and dopamine. Heart attack sufferers recover more quickly and survive longer when they have a pet at home, and children who are exposed to pets early in life may have a reduced risk of allergies and asthma.

For people with disabilities, pets can offer a lifeline to a more normal existence: guiding the blind, hearing for the deaf, and performing tasks for those who can't do for themselves. Dogs and cats -- even a tank full of fish -- calm frazzled nerves and ease anxiety and depression, according to research. In one study, pets seemed to temper some of the psychological stress of being a caregiver to someone who is ill or suffering from dementia.

Studies performed in nursing homes and hospitals have proven that the elderly in particular can benefit from the companionship of a dog or cat. Having a pet to care for helps fill the long, sometimes aimless hours and reminds seniors to nurture themselves just as they are caring for their pets.

In one study, researchers found that quiet time with a dog made nursing home residents in St. Louis feel less lonely, more so even than visits with both a dog and other residents. The study enrolled 37 nursing home residents with high scores on a loneliness scale who were interested in receiving weekly half-hour visits from dogs. Half of the study subjects had dog-only visits. The other half shared the dog with other nursing home residents. Both groups said they felt less lonely after the canine visit, but the decrease in loneliness was much more significant among those who had the dogs all to themselves.

Bottom line: Why do pets make us feel better? One reason is that pets alter our behavior -- when they are near, we tend to calm down and speak more slowly and softly. All types of animals offer distractions from the worries of the day, because we naturally shift our attention to them when they are around. Pets also provide an opportunity to touch and stroke another living thing, which has been shown to be of value to our mental and physical health.

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