

## Staying Healthy with Pets,

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Keeping a pet can help contribute to the physical and emotional health and well-being of a person. Surveys carried out in some countries, like in Australia for example, have shown that pet owners had lower blood pressure and were less at risk of heart attacks and strokes. They also revealed that those who owned pets, especially dogs, possessed better physical and mental health than non-owners. Pet owners visited doctors less often, had less sleeping difficulties and fewer of them took medication for high blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart problems.

Recent studies have shown that pets have a strong influence on individual owners as well as on the community. The comfort companion animals give to humans is now recognized and appreciated to actually improve the quality of life of inmates in institutions and hospitals. These animals can act as catalysts to develop the social behaviour of patients who are withdrawn and uncommunicative.

The relationship between owner and pet is due to many factors. It could be for physiological, psychological and therapeutic reasons. Psychiatrists and psychologists believe that pets can serve as an effective escape for people who do not have someone to love or be loved by. Pets also offer unconditional affection, something that is not easily attainable from humans. They fill a void for people who crave for closeness. Therefore, it is not surprising that owners of dogs and cats feel less lonely compared to non-pet owners. Pets also bring cheer, especially at the end of a stressful day. Spending time with a pet by way of a morning walk or other activity can help relax and refresh one for the day.

Pets have been known to alleviate emotional stress by providing joy, amusement and laughter to their owners. For childless couples, for example, pets can become the focus of their love and attention because looking after someone, talking and touching fill an instinctive need to feel wanted. Pets, in this instance, can act as substitutes for children. For some couples, having pets to look after makes it easier for them to graduate into parenthood. Separated, divorced or widowed people tend to have less problems socializing when they adopt pets. Pets provide them with a form of emotional security.

Pets can especially bring cheer and joy to residents of welfare homes, homes for the elderly and in hospitals. Their unconditional love and affection boosts the general well-being of abused or underprivileged children, the physically disabled, elderly or patients who may feel depressed, unwanted or lonely. This is why pets are being introduced in cancer hospitals and paediatric centers in some countries. Some of the animals that have been utilized therapeutically for the physical and mental healing of the handicapped or physically disabled include dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, horses and dolphins. In a similar way, animal-assisted therapy has its wealth of benefits in rehabilitation situations involving drug addicts, juvenile delinquents and prisoners.

The concept of bringing animals into welfare homes, prisons and hospitals should be stepped up because animals can give so much joy and happiness to inmates or patients who do not have much opportunity to venture outdoors or make new friends.

In the West and to a lesser extent in the East, dogs are trained to help the deaf, blind or sick. 'Hearing dogs' are trained to alert a deaf owner to sounds such as the doorbell, alarm clock, telephone or a crying baby. Guide dogs for the blind are taught to obey basic and standard commands like crossing roads, avoiding obstacles and fetching things for the owners. We have heard and read cases of how animals have saved the lives of their owners by activating home alarms that have links to hospitals or police stations when the animals recognize changes in the behaviour of their owners, who suffer from epileptic fits or seizures.

A further advantage of pet ownership is the fact that pets can be an important part of child development, teaching empathy, love and compassion in ways no human relationship can. Children who look after pets or animals are more sensitive to other people's feelings. Caring for pets also promotes tolerance, self-acceptance and provides an early lesson on the facts of life and death. Pets are also believed to enhance emotional development as they provide a sense of security to children. Through pets, children learn how to care for another living being and that in turn, helps boost their self-esteem, their socialising abilities and makes them feel less lonely. Owning a pet also gives children a sense of responsibility and something to do. They have to ensure their pets are fed, groomed and taken for a walk. In this way, children also learn to spend their time more productively and wisely. In the long run, children can be moulded into being caring and loving adults, responding positively to other people and treating them with respect.

Pet ownership carries with it responsibilities, but its joys and advantages far outweigh the responsibilities. Pets without doubt add value to and enhance our quality of life helping us to stay healthy and sound, and at the same time, to become more compassionate human beings.