

The Mood-Boosting Power of Pets

How Caring for a Dog or Cat Helps You Cope with Depression, Anxiety, and Stress



If you've ever owned a pet, you already know how much fun and affection they can bring. But did you know that pets also come with some pretty powerful mental and physical health benefits? Dogs and cats in particular can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve your cardiovascular health. Caring for an animal can help children grow up more secure and active. Pets also provide valuable companionship for older adults. Perhaps most importantly, though, a pet can add real joy and unconditional love to your life.

How pets can help you cope with depression, anxiety, and stress

While most pet owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals, many of us remain unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of snuggling up to a furry friend. It's only recently that studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond. Pets, especially dogs and cats, have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans and our behavior and emotions. Dogs, for example, are able to understand many of the words we use, but they're even better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language, and gestures. And like any good human friend, a loyal dog will look into your eyes to gauge your emotional state and try to understand what you're thinking and feeling (and to work out when the next walk or treat might be coming, of course).

Studies have found that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- People with pets have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without

pets. One study even found that when people with borderline hypertension adopted dogs from a shelter, their blood pressure declined significantly within five months.

- Playing with a dog or cat can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
- Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.
- While people with pets often experience the greatest health benefits, a pet doesn't necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower pulse rate.

One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Even hardened criminals in prison show long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, hugging, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly calm and soothe you when you're stressed or anxious. The companionship of a pet can also ease loneliness, and most dogs are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost your mood and ease depression.

How pets can help you make healthy lifestyle changes

Adopting healthy lifestyle changes plays an important role in easing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Caring for a pet can help you make healthy lifestyle changes by:

Increasing exercise. Taking a dog for a walk, hike or run are fun and rewarding ways to fit healthy daily exercise into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements—and exercising every day is great for the animal as well. It will deepen the connection between you, eradicate most behavior problems in dogs, and keep your pet fit and healthy.

Providing companionship. Companionship can help prevent illness and even add years to your life, while isolation and loneliness can trigger symptoms of depression. Caring for a live animal can help make you feel needed and wanted, and take the focus away from your problems, especially if you live alone. Most dog and cat owners talk to their pets, some even use them to work through their troubles. And nothing beats loneliness like coming home to a wagging tail or purring cat.

Helping you meet new people. Pets can be a great social lubricant for their owners, helping you start and maintain new friendships. Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each

other on walks, hikes, or in a dog park. Dog owners also meet new people in pet stores, clubs, and training classes.

Reducing anxiety. The companionship of an animal can offer comfort, help ease anxiety, and build self-confidence for people anxious about going out into the world. Because pets live in the moment—they don't worry about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow—they can help you become more mindful and appreciate the joy of the present.

Adding structure and routine to your day. Many pets, especially dogs, require a regular feeding and exercise schedule. Having a consistent routine keeps an animal balanced and calm—and it can work for you, too. No matter your mood—depressed, anxious, or stressed—one plaintive look from your pet and you'll have to get out of bed to feed, exercise, and care for them.

Providing sensory stress relief. Touch and movement are two healthy ways to [quickly manage stress](#). Stroking a dog, cat, or other animal can lower blood pressure and help you quickly feel calmer and less stressed.

Get a dog, lose weight

Numerous studies have linked dog ownership to weight loss:

- One year-long study found that walking an overweight dog helped both the animals and their owners lose weight. Researchers found that the dogs provided support in similar ways to a human exercise buddy, but with greater consistency and without any negative influence.
- Public housing residents who walked therapy dogs for up to 20 minutes five days a week lost an average of 14.4 pounds in a year, without changing their diets.
- A third study found that people with a dog walked 30 minutes more per week than they did before.

Source: *Harvard Health Publications*

The health benefits of pets for older adults

As well as providing vital companionship, owning a pet can play an important role in healthy aging by helping you to:

Find meaning and joy in life. As you age, you'll lose things that previously occupied your time and gave your life purpose. You may retire from your career or your children may move far away. Caring for a pet can bring pleasure and help boost your morale, optimism, and

sense of self-worth. Choosing to adopt a pet from a shelter, especially an older pet, can add to your sense of fulfillment, knowing that you've provided a home to a pet that may otherwise have been euthanized.

Stay connected. Maintaining a social network isn't always easy as you grow older. Retirement, illness, death, and relocation can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder. Pets, especially dogs, are a great way for older adults to spark up conversations and meet new people.

Boost your vitality. You can overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging by taking good care of yourself. Dogs and cats encourage playfulness, laughter, and exercise, which can help boost your immune system and increase your energy.

How pets help adults with Alzheimer's disease or dementia

As part of the disease, Alzheimer's patients may exhibit a variety of behavioral problems, many related to an inability to deal with stress.

- Research at the University of California at Davis concluded that Alzheimer's patients suffer less stress and have fewer anxious outbursts if there is a dog or cat in the home.
- Pets can provide a source of positive, nonverbal communication. The playful interaction and gentle touch from a well-trained, docile animal can help soothe an Alzheimer's patient and decrease aggressive behavior.
- In many cases a patient's problem behavior is a reaction to the stressed response of the primary caretaker. Pets can help ease the stress of caregivers. Cats or caged animals may be more suitable than dogs, which generally require more care and can add to the burden of someone who's already looking after an Alzheimer's patient.

The health benefits for children

Not only do children who grow up with pets have less risk of allergies and asthma, many also learn responsibility, compassion, and empathy from having a dog or cat.

- Unlike parents or teachers, pets are never critical and don't give orders. They are always loving and their mere presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. Having an ever-present pet can help ease separation anxiety in children when mom and dad aren't around.
- Having the love and companionship of a pet can make a child feel important and help them develop a positive self-image.
- Kids who are emotionally attached to their pets are better able to build relationships with other people.

- Studies have also shown that pets can help calm hyperactive or overly aggressive kids. Of course, both the animal and the child need to be trained to behave appropriately with each other.

Children and adults alike can benefit from playing with pets, which can provide a source of calmness and relaxation, as well as a source of stimulation for the brain and body. Playing with a pet can even be a doorway to learning for a child. It can stimulate a child's imagination and curiosity. The rewards of training a dog to perform a new trick, for example, can teach kids the importance of perseverance. Caring for a furry friend can also offer another benefit to a child: immense joy.

Children with learning disorders and other challenges

Some children with autism or other learning difficulties are better able to interact with pets than people. Autistic children often rely on nonverbal cues to communicate, just as animals do. And learning to first connect with a pet may even help an autistic child in their interactions with people.

- Pets can help children with learning disabilities learn how to regulate stress and calm themselves, making them better equipped to overcome the challenges of their disorder.
- Playing and exercising with a dog or cat can help a child with learning disorders stay alert and attentive throughout the day. It can also be a great antidote to stress and frustration caused by the learning disability.

Owning a pet is a major commitment

A pet is not a miracle cure for mental illness. Owning a pet is beneficial and comforting **only** for those who love and appreciate domestic animals and have the time and money to keep a pet happy and healthy. If you're simply not an "animal person," pet ownership is not going to provide you with any health benefits or improve your life.

Even if you love animals, it's important to understand everything that caring for a pet entails. Owning a pet is a commitment that will last through the animal's lifetime, perhaps 10 or 15 years in the case of dogs. And at the end of that commitment, you'll face the grief and mourning that comes with losing a beloved companion.

Other drawbacks to owning a pet are:

Pets cost money. Food bills, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses can mount up. If you're unemployed or

elderly, on a limited fixed income, it may be a struggle to cope with the expense of pet ownership.

Pets require time and attention. As any dog owner will tell you, there's nothing therapeutic about coming home to a dog that has been locked up in the house on his own all day long. Dogs need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced; most other pets require at least daily care and attention.

Owning a pet can curb some of your social activity. A dog can only be left alone for a limited time. By training your dog, you'll be able to take him with you to visit friends, run errands, or sit outside a coffee shop, for example, but you won't be able to leave for a spur of the moment weekend away without arranging care for your pet first.

Pets can be destructive. Any pet can have an occasional accident at home. Some cats may be prone to shredding upholstery, some dogs to chewing shoes. While training can help eradicate negative, destructive behavior, they remain common in animals left alone without exercise or stimulation for long periods of time.

Pets require responsibility. Most dogs, regardless of size and breed, are capable of inflicting injury on people if not handled responsibly by their owners. Even cats can scratch or bite. Pet owners need to be alert to any danger, especially around children.

Pets carry health risks for some people. While there are some diseases that can be transmitted from cats and dogs to their human handlers, allergies are the most common health risk of pet ownership. If you or a family member has been diagnosed with a pet allergy, carefully consider whether you can live with the symptoms before committing to pet ownership. Also consider that some friends or relatives with allergies may no longer be able to visit your home if you have a pet.

How to find the perfect pet

If you've decided that owning a pet is right for you, congratulations: you're about to open your life to a unique and rewarding relationship. While people who have pets tend to be happier, more independent, and feel more secure than those without pets, it's important to select the type of pet that best suits your needs and lifestyle.

Talk to other members of your household and agree on the qualities you want in a pet and those that you'd prefer to avoid. In the case of dogs, man's best friend comes in countless breeds or mix of breeds, each offering a different blend of personality traits:

- Do you want an active dog or one that doesn't need a lot of exercise?
- Who will look after the dog? Will your children really follow through on their promises?
- How much time will the dog spend alone each day? Do you intend to hire a dog walker

or take the animal to daycare?

- How big is your living space? Do you have enough room for a large breed?
- Do you live with young children or someone frail or disabled who would do better with a gentle breed?
- How much shedding can you tolerate?
- Do you want a puppy that needs training and housebreaking or a full-grown dog that is already trained?

Purebred vs. mixed breed dogs

If you have a specific breed of dog in mind, you can look for a rescue group that caters to that breed or seek out a reputable breeder. Ask for a referral from other dog owners, a veterinarian, or a local breed club or rescue group, but remember: a reputable breeder will always want to meet you before selling you a dog to ensure that you'll be a suitable, responsible owner.

Of course, you can also find purebred dogs in shelters—where they'll cost substantially less than from a breeder—as well as many different types of mixed breed dogs. Mixed breed dogs usually have fewer health problems than their purebred cousins, often have better dispositions, and tend to adapt more easily to a new home. With a purebred, though, it's easier to know what to expect in regards to size, behavior and health—you'd need to know the different mix of breeds to determine the same of a mutt. Of course, the breed or mix of breeds doesn't solely determine the character of a dog—much of that is up to you and the kind of home and training you provide for your pet.

Shelter and rescue animals

Whether mixed breed or a purebred, dogs and cats adopted from a shelter or rescue group make excellent pets. For the most part, a pet ends up in a shelter through no fault of his own. His owner may have died or moved to a place that doesn't allow pets, or the pet may have simply been abandoned by irresponsible owners who bought him on a whim and later discovered that they were unable or unwilling to care for him properly. If any shelter or rescue animal exhibits aggressive behavior, he is typically euthanized rather than offered for adoption.

Rescue groups try to find suitable homes for unwanted or abandoned dogs and cats, many taken from shelters where they would otherwise have been euthanized. Volunteers usually take care of the animals until they can find a permanent home. This means that rescuers are often very familiar with a pet's personality and can help advise you on whether the pet would make a good match for your needs. By adopting an animal from a shelter or rescue organization, you'll not only be giving a home to a deserving pet, but you'll also likely be saving an animal's life.

Avoid puppies sold in pet stores or on the Internet

Pet stores that care about puppies don't sell them. That's because the majority of pet stores that sell puppies carry dogs from cruel and inhumane puppy mills. Puppy mills are like dog-making factories where the mother dogs spend their entire lives in cramped cages or kennels with little or no personal attention or quality of life. When the mother and father dogs can no longer breed, they are discarded or killed. Consumers who purchase puppies from pet stores or over the Internet without seeing a breeder's home firsthand are often unknowingly supporting this cruel industry.

Help stop this cycle of cruelty simply by choosing to adopt your next pet from a shelter or rescue group, or by purchasing a dog only from a responsible breeder who will show you where your puppy was born and raised.

Source: *The Humane Society of the United States*

Alternatives to pet ownership

If you don't have the time, money, or stamina to own a pet full-time, there are still ways you can experience the health benefits of being around animals. Even short periods spent with a dog or cat can benefit both you and the animal.

You can ask to walk a neighbor's dog, for example, or [volunteer](#) at an animal shelter. Most animal shelters or rescue groups welcome volunteers to help care for homeless pets or assist at adoption events. You'll not only be helping yourself, but also helping to socialize and exercise the animals, making them more adoptable.

Some animal shelters and rescue groups offer pet "rental" programs. Dogs and cats that are available for adoption can be rented out for walks or play dates. You can also foster an animal temporarily until a permanent home is found for him, or to decide if the animal is right for you.

A variety of different organizations offer specially trained therapy dogs and cats to visit children's hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, hospice programs, shelters, and schools. During these visits, people are invited to pet and stroke the animals, which can improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

Recommended reading

[Get Healthy, Get a Dog](#) - The health benefits of canine companionship (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

HelpGuide

[The Power of Pets](#) - Explores the health benefits of human-animal interactions. (National Institutes of Health)

[Pets for the Elderly](#) - A non-profit charity that pays a portion of the adoption fee when a senior adopts a companion pet from one of their participating shelters in the U.S. (The Pets for the Elderly Foundation)

[Children & Dogs](#) - Tips for parents about ensuring a safe and loving relationship. (Your Dog's Friend)

[Choosing the Right Dog](#) - Tips on choosing a dog that's right for you. (Blue Cross for Pets)

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