

EXPLORE WELLNESS

7 Ways Pets Benefit Mental Health¹

Keeping an animal at home can be good for you, and not just as a distraction after a long day

Boulder Wellness Psychology (February 25, 2015) shares the article, *7 Ways Pets Benefit Mental Health*

The benefits of pet ownership have been clear since before people started referring to dogs as “man’s best friend,” and continue to be helpful today.



1) They make your heart work.

It’s hard to stay indoors for too long if you have a pet – especially a dog.

Taking your pet outside for a walk or a trip to the park isn’t just good for the animal, it’s good for you too.

Exercise lowers blood pressure, cholesterol, and the risk of heart problems, placing less strain on your body and making you less vulnerable to depression and other mental ailments.

In addition to unplugging from your digital devices and improving your mood, the outdoors can provide essentials like vitamin D from sun exposure, and physical fitness from moving around.

2) Pets can boost immunity.

The health benefits of keeping animals around can also extend to your immune system, especially for children.

The risk of allergies in babies exposed to multiple dogs or cats was reduced by as much as 77 percent, according to one study. Researchers think that the additional bacteria carried by the animals made the babies’ immune systems work harder, which strengthened them for the future.

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Allergies have been linked to mental health conditions like anxiety and depression in a number of ways. Allergies can contribute to insomnia, a common manifestation of mental distress. Allergies can also force individuals to stay inside, causing lethargy and a lack of connection to the outside world.

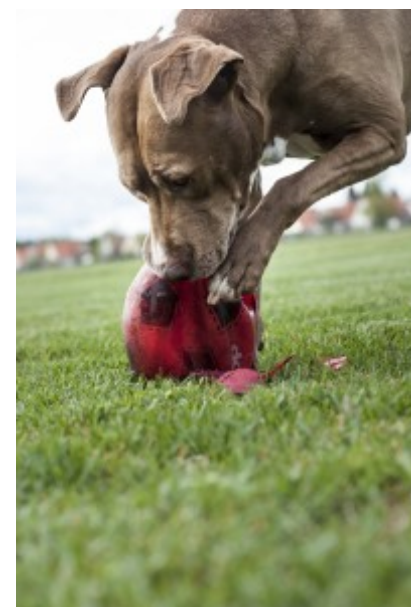
3) They can reduce stress and improve anxiety and depression.

Studies show that interacting with a friendly animal can reduce the effect of stress responses and reduce anxiety and depression by affecting neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine.

Grooming or petting an animal also releases oxytocin, the hormone in your body closely associated with love and attachment. This naturally reduces stress, and also improves heart health and lowers blood pressure.

And speaking of attachment, caring for an animal can make you feel needed, and create a sense of purpose outside of work or school.

The long term bond you form with your pet can be a remedy for feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression. A study published by the American Psychological Association found a greater sense of well-being among dog owners, including increased feelings of belonging, self-esteem and meaningful existence.



4) Pets help with PTSD.

Pets are great listeners, a helpful trait for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder. Further, the sense of comfort and safety that people experience with pets can be profoundly healing for people who have experienced trauma.

People with PTSD have found that a furry friend around is quite helpful. A program called Paws for Purple Hearts even pairs dogs with war veterans to help them overcome PTSD symptoms.

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5) Animals are a great icebreaker.

As any fan of romantic comedies can tell you, pets can naturally create social interaction and ways to meet people.

Pet owners are members of a self-selecting group, and are often happy to talk about their animals at the dog park, walking through the neighborhood, or in line at the store for kibble.

If you are uncomfortable or anxious in social situations, your pet can be a conversation topic and a welcome diversion when small talk slows down.

6) They force you to be present.

Nothing is more distracting than animals that need attention, whether that means feeding them, taking them outside (see above), or just giving them a scratch between the ears.

While this might be exasperating if you're trying to finish a big work presentation, these distractions can be helpful for individuals who suffer from anxiety.

If you often find yourself trapped by worry, concerns about the future, or reliving past troubles, a pet can free you from these thoughts by giving you something to focus on in the moment.

This is similar to the principles of mindfulness, a proven method of therapy that helps you stay grounded and be more effective in the present.

7) Your relationship is uncomplicated.

Our everyday relationships with significant others, children, friends, co-workers, bosses and baristas can include a lot of push-and-pull. One person needs this, another person isn't available when you need them, on and on.

But when you come home and your dog's tail wags, or your cat rubs against your leg, you don't have to worry about hurt feelings. Your pets are always happy to see you, and want nothing more than your happiness in return. (And maybe a treat.)

You can talk to your animals about whatever you want, and even practice a conversation or speech with them. And when you tell them to "speak," they won't launch into a long discussion about reality TV or the Bronco's offense.



1. Boulder Wellness Psychology. (2015). *7 Ways Pets Benefit Mental Health*. Retrieved from <http://myboulderpsychologist.com/7-ways-pets-benefit-mental-health/>