

THE HEALING POWER OF PETS

Do you often feel sad? Lonely? Alone? Depressed? As though you didn't have a friend in the world? That the burdens of life rest upon your shoulders? Are these feelings often accompanied by lethargy, lack of energy or vitality, overall weakness or fatigue, physical unrest or discomfort? Did you know that a pet might be able to help you to cope with or even overcome these challenges and actually help "heal" you mentally, physically and emotionally?

It's true! There is extensive scientific data and evidence indicating that pets are natural born healers who not only improve the quality of our lives but also increase our longevity. Animal companions provide physical and emotional well being. In fact, the simple act of petting an animal friend has proven to be of significant physical and psychological benefit. His presence has a calming effect. Heartbeat is improved. Blood pressure is reduced. Our resistance to disease is heightened, and tension is decreased. Even cholesterol levels are improved, and animal owners ("pet parents") pay fewer visits to doctors and hospitals. Our animal companions reduce stress, fear and anger. They also decrease loneliness, anxiety and depression.

According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), scientists have studied the pets-and-health bond for quite some time. Rebecca Johnson, a Professor of Gerontological Nursing at the University of Missouri has presented findings that suggest that interaction with pets may minimize or even reverse some of the damaging cell changes that occur naturally with aging. According to Professor Johnson, levels of endorphins, serotonin and prolactin – elements that can enhance feelings of wellbeing – increased in study participants during interaction, while cortisol levels (stress hormones) decreased.

Not only does interaction with pets decrease stress and related cardiovascular illnesses, but caring for a pet has practical daily benefits. For example, having a dog increases the likelihood of regular outdoor exercise. Daily walking provides well-known benefits for cardiovascular health and fitness. Walking a dog may also offer socialization with other dog or pet owners. Also, the opportunity to nurture and serve as a caregiver to another living creature offer the pet parenthood a sense of fulfillment and may even provide a reason for getting up in the morning. Indoor pets also provide significant benefits. A study published in the Journal of the American geriatrics Society reported that senior citizens who own pets are less likely to be depressed, are better able to tolerate social isolation and are more active than those who do not own pets, regardless of the type of pet owned.

Our animal companions also serve as a link to Nature and through Nature our spirits are elevated. We receive comfort, solace and upliftment through the natural world of which our animal companions, are, of course ambassadors. They remind us of the beauty, power, complexity and wonder of the natural world. Sadly, too many of us have lost awareness of this relationship- our connectedness to all living beings. We are, instead, bombarded and overwhelmed by technology. Our lives are too often detached from one another, and our relationships are too often impersonal. We can get close with our pets who accept us just as we are and without judgment. We can let down our guard, share our secrets and allow ourselves to trust our pets. We can be genuinely who we are without façade or pretension. Our animal companions offer us unconditional love, loyalty and affection and keep us "grounded" helping us to reassess our priorities and to put matters in perspective.

Pets, through their playfulness, joie de vivre and spontaneity, have a soothing and therapeutic effect on their owners. Their presence and very essence reveal the life force, the creative force, the energy and vitality that exist in all of us. Even if we are unable to find inspiring relationships among other people, we find genuine love, friendship companionship, loyalty and camaraderie through the animals we adopt.

Through our animal companions we learn many invaluable lessons about life and death and the aging process. They serve as teachers, guides, helpers and healers. They accompany us on our life journey and through life's triumphs and defeats as well as our joys and sorrows. Perhaps it is time for you to consider adopting one of life's greatest sources of love and happiness...