

THE HEALING POWER OF YOUR FAMILY PET

By

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There are some very good reasons that Americans share their homes with approximately 68 million dogs and 73 million cats and spend about 34 billion dollars a year on their animal companions. Why the love affair with pets? Well, for one reason, there is significant scientific evidence that pets not only help reduce the amount of time we spend at the doctor's office, but they also improve the quality of our lives and increase our longevity! For Baby Boomers and Seniors, in particular this is very good news!

It has long been acknowledged that our pets bring us many gifts and life lessons – friendship, companionship, unconditional love, loyalty, acceptance and forgiveness. Children, as well as adults and seniors have always shared a special bond with animals. Dogs, cats, horses, birds, among many others, become our brothers, sisters, and best friends. For many older men and women who are widowed, divorced or separated from human family members and friends and who are alone and lonely, these animal companions become their “children” and beloved members of the family.

Older adults trust and confide in their animal companions. A pet supplies security, a safe haven and comfort zone, in which we can let down our guard and truly be ourselves without worrying about how we look or act or appear to others. And an animal companion doesn't judge, blame or criticize us. It loves and accepts us just as we are. It is loyal and empathetic and stays close and supportive during hard times. It is beside our side when we are ill or sad or depressed. The animal is there for us no matter how stressful, difficult or challenging one's life becomes. In addition, for both children and adults and particularly the elderly, pets fill a basic human need to love and nurture.

Family pets also make us feel useful and needed. They encourage us to engage in life more actively as the pet depends upon its family for food, exercise and medical care. They entertain and amuse us – they provide fun and laughter simply by being genuinely who they are. They seem to understand our feelings and attempt to accommodate them. They enable us to have someone nonjudgmental with whom to talk and communicate. They tend to bring us closer together as families as they share so much of our lives with us – day in, day out, holidays, vacation time – even when we're having a meal, reading, talking on the phone, watching television, and so on.

But the benefits of pet ownership do not end here. Animals may serve as a uniting thread in a family that is undergoing significant lifestyle changes. For example, families experiencing Empty Nest or Retirement as their children go off to college or on to marriage and families of their own may experience loneliness, depression, anxiety a sense of loss and purposelessness which the comforting presence of animal companions can decrease or even help eliminate. A pet's presence may help ease these transitions.

There are many physiological as well as psychological benefits associated with pet ownership. The simple act of petting an animal friend has proven to be of significant physical and psychological benefit. His presence has a calming effect. Blood pressure is reduced. Heartbeat is improved. Resistance to disease is heightened and tension is decreased. Our animal companions reduce stress, fear and anger. They also decrease loneliness and depression. As we get older, these pets can also offer us a sense of well being, encouragement, support and friendship. Loving and caring for an animal companion helps us to remain active and stay healthy. They may even provide us with a new purpose in life and a reason for living.

Our animal companions provide us with so many gifts. They serve as our friends, teachers, healers and guides. They teach us patience, loyalty, grace and gratitude. Most importantly, they teach and bring us the most precious gift life has to offer – that of unconditional Love.

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