

# How to Have Healthy Relationships with Animals

By:

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# Animals Help You Become a Better Person

# Some Ways:

-It's often the case that the things we enjoy most in life are the worst things for us, but luckily, that's not the case with our pets.

-The mere presence of a pet in the room can break the ice among strangers and bring smiles and laughter to everyone around, and all that positive energy can only yield good things.

-With the great diversity of pets available (even among dog breeds), anyone can find the right fit for their lifestyle and abilities, and reap the benefits of having an animal companion in the home.

-Animals don't ask for a lot, but the few simple things we do to care for them really make a difference in their lives.

-Thousands of pets out there are in need of a good home, and in exchange for your compassion, they can help you make friends, feel healthier and happier, and might even save your life. What's not to love?

**They Improve Your Health**

-Whether you're rubbing your dog's belly, tossing a ball of string for your cat, or watching your fish swim in a tank, a meaningful connection with your pet can elevate your mood and relieve stress.

-According to psychology professor and pet researcher Allen R. McConnell, PhD, "We found that pet owners, on average, were better off than non-owners, especially when they have a higher-quality relationship with their pets."

-Babies who grow up with pets are less likely to get allergies and asthma because early exposure to allergens like pet dander helps desensitize the immune system to them.

-Dog owners fare especially well because they need regular walks.

-Walking lowers blood pressure and lowers the risk of heart disease. Not to mention the positive effects on the physique.

**They Make Life More Meaningful**

-Pets provide companionship and help owners find joy and meaning in their lives, especially if they lack a strong support system. Coming home to a welcoming pet instead of an empty house curbs loneliness, and caring for a pet's needs helps owners forget about their own problems.

-For people with special needs, animals help them cope like nothing else can. Patients with Alzheimer's feel calmer when a pet is around, even just a fish. Similarly, autistic children are less likely to feel anxious and have outbursts in the presence of their pet.

-A calmer demeanor makes people more pleasant to be around, improving relations with their family and friends.

**They Help Your Social Life**

-All guardians love talking about their animals, sharing funny stories and offering advice about pet care.

-Simply owning a pet breaks the ice, creating common ground between people and the opportunity for shy and anxious individuals to make friends.

-A timid person might typically look down and avoid eye contact when passing someone else on the street, but if both people are walking dogs, they can use the “doggie meet up” as an excuse to chat and get to know each other.

They Show You How to Live in the  
Moment

-People are always fretting about their jobs, deadlines, chores, romantic relationships, past failures, and other things they have little control over.

-Though some animals have suffered from abuse, they don't dwell on the past, which is why they are able to be rehabilitated and begin a new life.

-Instead, pets live in the moment, fully enjoying a game of fetch or a new toy or cuddling with their owners, never thinking about the "more productive" things they could be doing.

-By observing their pets, owners learn to take time out for fun and relaxation.

**They Can Make You More Empathetic**

-Recent research published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology shows that people who were attached to animals as teenagers and young adults are more empathetic than others, perhaps because they were partially responsible for their family pets' caretaking and witnessed the consequences and benefits of their actions on an animal's well-being.

**Animal are helpful to human**

-Research on human-animal interactions is still relatively new. ... Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone) and lower blood pressure.

-Other studies have found that animals can reduce loneliness, increase feelings of social support, and boost your mood.

# Impact on Physical Health

- Decreased blood pressure.
- Decreased cholesterol levels.
- Decreased triglyceride levels.
- Decreased feelings of loneliness.
- Increased opportunities for exercise and outdoor activities.
- Increased opportunities for socialization.

# How pets can impact your health

-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.

-Studies have shown 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.

# The Power of Pets



-Nothing compares to the joy of coming home to a loyal companion.

-The unconditional love of a pet can do more than keep you company.

-Pets may also decrease stress, improve heart health, and even help children with their emotional and social skills.

-An estimated 68% of U.S. households have a pet.

-But who benefits from an animal?

-And which type of pet brings health benefits?

-Research on human-animal interactions is still relatively new. Some studies have shown positive health effects, but the results have been mixed.

-Researchers are looking into how animals might influence child development. They're studying animal interactions with kids who have **autism**, **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder** (ADHD), and other conditions.

There's not one answer about how a pet can help somebody with a specific condition," explains Dr. Layla Esposito:

-Is your goal to increase physical activity? Then you might benefit from owning a dog:

-You have to walk a dog several times a day and you're going to increase physical activity.

-If your goal is reducing stress, sometimes watching fish swim can result in a feeling of calmness. So there's no one type fits all."

# Animals Helping People

-Animals can serve as a source of comfort and support.

-Therapy dogs are especially good at this.

-They're sometimes brought into hospitals or nursing homes to help reduce patients' stress and anxiety.

Dogs are very present. If someone is struggling with something, they know how to sit there and be loving," says Dr. Ann Berger, a physician and researcher at the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. "Their attention is focused on the person all the time.

-Berger works with people who have cancer and terminal illnesses. She teaches them about **mindfulness** to help decrease stress and manage pain.

-The foundations of mindfulness include attention, intention, compassion, and awareness," Berger says. "All of those things are things that animals bring to the table. People kind of have to learn it. Animals do this innately.

-Researchers are studying the safety of bringing animals into hospital settings because animals may expose people to more germs.

-A current study is looking at the safety of bringing dogs to visit children with cancer, Esposito says.

-Scientists will be testing the children's hands to see if there are dangerous levels of germs transferred from the dog after the visit.

-Dogs may also aid in the classroom. One study found that dogs can help children with ADHD focus their attention.

-Researchers enrolled two groups of children diagnosed with ADHD into 12-week group therapy sessions. The first group of kids read to a therapy dog once a week for 30 minutes. The second group read to puppets that looked like dogs.

-Kids who read to the real animals showed better social skills and more sharing, cooperation, and volunteering. They also had fewer behavioral problems.

- Another study found that children with autism spectrum disorder were calmer while playing with guinea pigs in the classroom.
- When the children spent 10 minutes in a supervised group playtime with guinea pigs, their anxiety levels dropped.
- The children also had better social interactions and were more engaged with their peers. The researchers suggest that the animals offered unconditional acceptance, making them a calm comfort to the children.

-Animals can become a way of building a bridge for those social interactions," Griffin says. He adds that researchers are trying to better understand these effects and who they might help.

-Animals may help you in other unexpected ways. A recent study showed that caring for fish helped teens with diabetes better manage their disease.

-Researchers had a group of teens with type 1 diabetes care for a pet fish twice a day by feeding and checking water levels. The caretaking routine also included changing the tank water each week.

-This was paired with the children reviewing their blood glucose (blood sugar) logs with parents.

-Researchers tracked how consistently these teens checked their blood glucose. Compared with teens who weren't given a fish to care for, fish-keeping teens were more **disciplined** about checking their own blood glucose levels, which is essential for maintaining their health.

-While pets may bring a wide range of health benefits, an animal may not work for everyone.

-Recent studies suggest that early exposure to pets may help protect young children from developing allergies and asthma.

-But for people who are allergic to **certain** animals, having pets in the home can do more harm than good.

Helping Each Other

-Pets also bring new responsibilities. Knowing how to care for and feed an animal is part of owning a pet. NIH/Mars funds studies looking into the effects of human-animal interactions for both the pet and the person.

-Remember that animals can feel stressed and fatigued, too. It's important for kids to be able to recognize signs of stress in their pet and know when not to approach. Animal bites can cause serious harm.

-“Dog bite prevention is certainly an issue parents need to consider, especially for young children who don’t always know the boundaries of what’s appropriate to do with a dog,” Esposito explains.

-Researchers will continue to explore the many health effects of having a pet. “We’re trying to find out what’s working, what’s not working, and what’s safe—for both the humans and the animals,” Esposito says.

# Children's Emotional Development

-When a child has no brothers or sisters, research shows that pets help children develop greater empathy, higher **self-esteem**, and increased participation in **social** and **physical activities**.

Get a dog, lose weight



-A number of studies have linked owning a dog to losing weight:

-A year-long study at the Wellness Institute at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago found that walking an overweight dog helped both the animals and their owners shed unwanted pounds.

-Researchers found that the dogs provided support in similar ways to a human exercise buddy, but with greater consistency and without any negative influence.

-Another study by the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction found that 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, conducted by dog food manufacturer Mars Petcare, found that people with a dog walked 30 minutes more per week than they did before owning a dog.

# The health benefits of pets for older adults

## 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.

# 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.