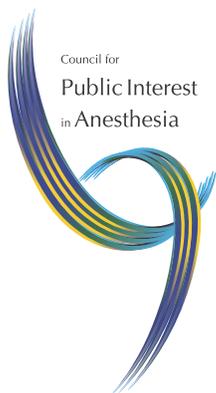


## Pets Can Be the Best Medicine

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Throughout history and in every culture, animals and humans have formed bonds. Cats are excellent mousers, and dogs are natural watchdogs and protectors. Both are loyal friends. First appearing around 1000 A.D., the word *pet* was used for any favored animal that was tamed and treated with indulgence or fondness—the beginning of our modern concept of family companion animals.

For many people, pets are more than a companion. They are beloved family members that provide unconditional love. Now, research has shown that pets not only provide emotional support, but might also help their owners stay healthy.

Historically, the benefits of human-animal interactions were thought to be largely “feel-good” in nature. But now, an increasing amount of research proves that contact with animals can bring real physiological and psychological benefits. Many animals are natural social creatures, extremely loyal, and possess a strong desire to communicate. Their presence encourages interaction among the people around them, promoting a more interactive social environment. They help people of all ages learn about responsibility, loyalty, empathy, sharing, and unconditional acceptance.

Over the last decade studies have emerged to support the widely held anecdotal view that interacting with animals is therapeutic. The studies are varied, looking at the benefits of pet ownership, volunteer therapy pets, animal assisted therapy (AAT) involving a trained animal, and the use of service animals such as a guide dog. However, a common finding between the studies is that animals have an intrinsically therapeutic effect on owners and patients.<sup>1,2</sup>

Florence Nightingale was one of the early advocates of the benefits of companion animals for the chronically ill. Now, researchers around the world have shown a direct correlation between pet ownership and improved health including reducing stress, helping to prevent illness and allergies, lowering blood pressure, aiding recovery, and boosting fitness levels.

### Physiological Benefits

Studies examining heart rate and stress chemicals for example, have shown that even relatively brief interactions with a pet produced measurable beneficial effects. The tactile stimulation involved in animal companionship provides a pleasurable form of neurological stimulation that also encourages relaxation and well-being. Petting an animal has a relaxing, or anxiolytic, effect similar to other activities that release muscle tension, lower blood pressure, and slow the heart and breathing rates. The effects did not vary based on race, sex, or pet ownership.



In today’s complex and anxious environment, millions of people suffer from chronic stress, a major risk factor in many physical and mental health conditions. Long-term pet ownership has been found to result in positive cardiac outcomes, such as living longer and recovering faster after a heart attack than non-owners. Pet interactions, usually with dogs and cats, have been found to lower cortisol levels to promote lower blood pressure and relaxation, and further boost other neurochemicals to produce feelings of satisfaction and happiness.<sup>3</sup>

Dogs and cats are not the only animals to provide these benefits. Horses, dolphins, and rabbits serve in various capacities as therapy animals. Watching tropical fish in an aquarium at a dentist’s office has been shown to work as well as hypnosis for patients nervous about undergoing surgery. The presence of gerbils and birds was found to calm jittery children in doctors’ waiting rooms.

### Pets as Helpers and Therapists

The perpetually stressed aren’t the only people who benefit from a relationship with animals.

Therapy animals not only to provide love and support to people with disabilities, they also help them get through the routine chores of daily life.

Increasingly, various forms of animal therapies are used as a means to help children and adults overcome physical, emotional, and learning challenges. Most of us are familiar with the service animals that play a significant and necessary role in fostering independence and allowing disabled individuals to physically and emotionally cope with difficult situations. For example, guide dogs for the visually impaired, hearing dogs for the hearing impaired, and assistance dogs for the disabled. They are specially trained and live with their caregivers to

offer round-the-clock assistance. Service dogs play a doubly important role; they physically help their owners in addition to being adored and respected companions.

A therapy pet is an animal with a good temperament and disposition, and a reliable, predictable behavior that is often used in health-care, social, educational, and recreational settings. Therapy pets encourage a sense of well being and help individuals remain active and healthy.

Among the elderly, therapy animals are used in hospices, nursing homes, hospitals, short-term care facilities, and even residential dwellings. These animals visit patients, who are encouraged to pet, interact, and play with them. Pet therapy animals provide entertainment, diversion, sensory stimulation, and an opportunity for reminiscences. The patients exhibit signs of improved physical health and mental well-being.<sup>4,5</sup>

In healthcare, pet therapy is also used in clinical programs to treat social or emotional difficulties and communication disorders. These pets, also known as animal-assisted therapy pets (AAT), help facilitate physical and psychological sessions with patients of all ages, whether in a psychological counseling session or a round of physical therapy. These animals are part of a formal and carefully designed program, with specific short and long-term goals that matches one specific patient to one specific animal.

Many hospitals have therapeutic programs that use dogs, cats, and rabbits to work with and visit depressed and scared patients. Animals are also increasingly brought in to comfort lonely seniors, emotionally and physically abused children and adults, babies born addicted, survivors of traumatic events, AIDS patients, cancer patients, and the mentally ill. The mere presence of the animal may facilitate interactions with the non-communicative patient and teach appropriate behavior patterns in those with emotional disabilities. For example, animals, particularly dolphins, have been found to be especially effective in helping children with autism.

Animals can also reduce isolation and loneliness. Pets can act as a confidant, a provider of unconditional devotion, and they can motivate individuals to exercise and socialize. We know there are many physical benefits of exercise when walking or running with the dog. Further, people tend to smile, laugh, and generally feel better when pets are around. Some researchers feel these positive physiological impacts can be explained by the fact that animals fulfill the need for attention, affection, and affiliation with others that is part of the human experience.

Data is also emerging to support the role that involvement in animal-assisted therapy has played in increased social interactions and motivation, improved mood, and reduced aggression among their handlers. Studies of dog training programs housed in adult prisons have shown a reduction in the frequency of institutional infractions and great improvements in prisoner perceptions of achievement, having a social role or function, and improved self-worth and self-esteem.<sup>6</sup>

Pet assisted therapy covers a wide range of activities, from a simple visit to a patient, to comforting the dying, to providing stimu-

lation and muscle-coordination retraining to a stroke victim, or serving as an independent living assistant to the physically handicapped. A companion animal, whether in the owner-pet relationship or in the therapeutic context, is perceived as an important, supportive part of our lives and significant cardiovascular and behavioral benefits are associated with those perceptions.<sup>3,5</sup>

### Interested in Volunteering with Your Pet?

Studies report that engaging in regular volunteer work increases life expectancy and a sense of happiness among those who share their time helping others. If you own a pet and have an interest in pet therapy programs, several national organizations and numerous regional groups exist to help select, train, and certify dogs and their handlers. See [www.therapypets.com](http://www.therapypets.com)

Are you thinking about welcoming a pet into your life? Consider adopting a homeless animal from your local shelter. Whether you want a cat, puppy, or a more mature dog, a purebred or a one-of-a-kind mixed breed, even a rabbit or hamster, your shelter is the best source to help potential adopters find the most suitable animal for your lifestyle, ensuring a great match.

The bond between humans and animals is powerful. Animals are incredibly forgiving and provide warmth, attention, comfort, and unconditional affection. Pets make us feel safe, happy and well. There's no better therapy. ■

*Animals are such agreeable friends—they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.*

*George Eliot*

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