

Editorial

The Human Psyche Around Pets

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Editor

Today, continuing with an older editorial piece I wrote, let's bring the talk back to our four legged friends, and rather than confining it to just the canine variety, let's expand it to include the feline one too. The impact pets have on our mental and psychological health is profound. Over the last few decades. Several studies have observed the positive effects that keeping and caring for a pet can have on the human brain.

Dog owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.

People with dogs 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 dogs survive longer than those without.

Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.

These are just a handful of observations made by different studies, but to narrow it down to our subject for today, these are the 6 main effects pets can have on you:

Pets offer a soothing presence: Studies indicate that merely watching fish lowers blood pressure and muscle tension in people about to undergo oral surgery. Other research shows that pet owners have significantly lower blood pressure and heart rate both before and while performing stressful mental tasks — like, say, performing a family intervention or supervising kids' homework. Finally, persons recovering from heart attacks recover more quickly and survive longer when there is a pet at home. It seems as though their mere presence is beneficial.

Pets offer unconditional love and acceptance: As far as we know, pets are without opinions, critiques, and verdicts. Even if you smell like their poop, they will snuggle up next to you. In other words, at times we prefer our four-legged friends to our mouthy pals because we can divulge our innermost thoughts and not be judged, and that could be a magical stress reliever.

Pets alter our behavior: Now, here's a typical scenario. You come home through the door in the

evening and you're annoyed. At what, I don't know. A million little snafus that happened throughout the day. And you're dangerously close to taking it out on someone. However, before you could do that, your Lab walks up to you, pats you, wanting some attention. So you kneel down and pet her. And Voila! She altered your behavior. Chances are much better that someone will not become a casualty of your frustrations. We tend to calm down when we are with our dogs and cats. We slow our breath, our speech, our minds. We don't hit as many people or use as many curse words as we might like to.

Pets distract: Pets are like riveting movies and books. They take us out of our heads and into another reality — one that only involves food, water, affection, and maybe an animal butt — for as long as we can allow. I've found distraction to be the only effective therapy when you've hit a point where there is no getting your head back. It's tough to ruminate about how awful you feel and will feel forever when your dog is breathing in your face.

Pets promote touch: The healing power of touch is undisputed. Research indicates a 45-minute massage can decrease levels of the stress hormone cortisol and optimize your immune system by building white blood cells. Hugging floods our bodies with oxytocin, a hormone that reduces stress, and lowers blood pressure and heart rates. The touch can actually stop certain regions of the brain from responding to threat clues. It's not surprising, then, that stroking a dog or cat can lower blood pressure and heart rate and boost levels of serotonin and dopamine.

Pets make us responsible: With pets comes great responsibility, and responsibility — according to depression research — promotes mental health. Positive psychologists assert that we build our self-esteem by taking ownership of a task, by applying our skills to a job. When we succeed — i.e., the pet is still alive the next day — we reinforce to ourselves that we are capable of caring for another creature as well as ourselves. That's why chores are so important in teaching adolescents self-mastery and independence.

And so, to keep it simple, pets have a positive impact on our lives, mentally, psychologically, physiologically and even physically. So go out there and get yourselves a four legged friend.