

*'What greater gift than the love of a cat?' Charles Dickens*



*'There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face.' Ben Williams*

# The Power of Pets

BY SIMONE SOMMER

Anyone who has ever owned a pet knows that they bring something special to your life. They make you smile when you walk in the door, and are the perfect listener, day or night. And now research proves what animal-lovers have known for centuries – pets are good for your physical and mental health.

The human-animal bond is not a modern phenomenon. Animals have played an important role in human society throughout the ages – in customs, religion, folklore and day-to-day life. Some animals were even attributed magical healing powers; for example, in ancient Greece, dogs licked the wounds of the injured because their tongues were believed to hold medicinal value.

Early civilisations also recognised that animals were not only a source of labour and food, but also friends and companions. In fact, in 1976, a 12,000-year-old human skeleton was discovered in Israel, affectionately clutching the remains of a puppy. Early documents show that in 1792 animals were also included in the treatment of mental illness in England. And during World War II, recovering patients were encouraged to interact with companion animals and work on farms.

Today, research shows that pets play many beneficial roles in our lives – teacher, healer, comforter, and even therapist...

## **teacher**

The link between how people treat animals and how they treat each other is well documented, so caring for a pet is an important part of our development. By relying on us for their survival, animals teach people of all ages important life skills such as responsibility, loyalty, empathy, kindness and patience.

Pets also teach us how to communicate and interact with other creatures. Whether it's the gentleness and caring that's essential in those first few weeks of bringing a new pet home, or the confidence and knowledge needed when approaching an unknown animal, all are crucial life skills.

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*'Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.' Roger Caras*

*'Animals are such agreeable friends – they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.' George Elliot*



#### healer

Most of us will recall a day when the companionship of a loyal pet gave us more comfort in times of stress or illness than the bitter-tasting medicine our mum spoon-fed us. Nowadays, the healing power of pets is not only recognised by the medical profession, but has also been scientifically proven.

A 2002 study showed that cat- and dog-owners had significantly lower baseline heart rate and blood pressure levels than participants without pets, and lower reactivity to stress tests. Pet owners also made fewer errors during mental arithmetic challenges! Another test looked at a group of patients who had experienced strokes and discovered that those who were in the company of a loved pet actually recovered in a shorter period of time.

The physical act of touching is an important part of every person's life, from birth right through to old age. Not only does stroking an animal give us comfort and relieve stress (in turn lowering heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure), the movement itself is also beneficial to sufferers of arthritis.

Another health advantage of owning a pet is that you're encouraged to participate in play, increasing your physical activity and decreasing stress levels, making a healthier, happier you.

Over the years, studies have found the following health benefits for kids: children exposed to pets during the first year of life have a lower frequency of allergic rhinitis and asthma; children with autism who have pets have more pro-social behaviours and less autistic behaviours such as self-absorption; and the presence of a dog during a medical examination decreases the child's stress.

#### comforter

Animals are a great comfort when you're feeling down. Whether you've had a bad day at school or work, or you're simply in need of a hug, pets will give you unconditional love and companionship. Animals accept you the way you are, and are true, loyal friends.

A pet is a great antidote for loneliness, often more so than a fellow human. In fact, a 2006 survey showed that retirement home residents felt much less lonely after spending time alone with a dog than they did when they were visited by a dog and other people! All of these benefits can reduce the amount of stress people experience due to lack of social support. Having an animal by your side also makes you more approachable to other people, providing an increased social network and a chance to communicate with fellow animal-lovers.



Retirement homes also regularly have visiting animals, or even resident pets and it's not hard to understand why. Aside from the comfort of company, elderly people forced to leave behind family pets when they relocate to a retirement home can rekindle the companionship and love of animals. Recipients hold, groom or play with the animal, often talking about the pets they used to have, boosting morale and communication.

In addition to being a valuable cure for loneliness in the elderly, a pet can also play a significant role in the lives of young children. They become something to depend upon when things let them down, and are not judgemental, so no matter how bad the child's day, a pet's unconditional love can repair self-esteem.

Pets also help people cope with bereavement. Researchers found that non-pet owners dealing with the loss of a loved one reported more health complaints than those with pets, and they used more medication to cope.

#### therapist

Just as early civilisations realised the incredible potential of a close relationship with animals, today we appreciate not only their companionship, but also their incredible therapeutic power. Specially trained dogs can be the eyes and

ears of the blind and deaf and some help with everyday tasks for those who are physically impaired. Horses play an integral role in the lives of the disabled, helping with confidence and independence, while they also have therapeutic advantages.

Other companion animals serve as 'therapists' to residents of hospitals, and even prisons. Animals visit and provide comfort to depressed patients and autistic children, giving them a purposeful routine to their day, which has shown to have a calming effect.

Another example of pets coming to the rescue when there is emotional need was after the September 11 tragedy in the USA. Therapy dogs visited firemen at Ground Zero, as well as other survivors at rescue centres. People affected by the disaster were happy to pet the dogs, relieving some of their stress and anxiety – a moment of relief and a chance to grieve to a calm and compassionate creature when there were no words.

#### mutual benefit

Pets don't ask us for much – just food, shelter and vet care, plus companionship. In return, they enrich our lives in more ways than one, making us better people. They teach us about love, improve our physical and emotional health, and provide every person with unconditional friendship.

