



THE HEALTH POWER OF PETS

By Dev Berger | Managing Editor

Those of us with pets will tell you that they are family. No matter what the pet – canines, cats, reptiles, birds, horses, cows, you name it - we love the companionship, happiness and purpose pets bring into our lives.

Over 90 million American households (70% of Americans) have a pet, and pet owners don't have trouble believing what research bears out: pets decrease our stress, improve our heart health, help kids with emotional and social skills, improve our mental health, and even help us exercise more.

Research from various organizations such as the National Institutes for Health, John Hopkins Medicine, the Mayo Institute and more, show pets help out with healthy aging. Older adults report not just experiencing less stress because of pets, but less loneliness and a better quality of life. They also report lower rates of depression because of the strong connections with their pets. More recent research by institutions like Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University, the University of California, Davis, and the Pacific Neuroscience Institute, show that pets help older adults manage long-term diseases like dementia and Alzheimer's, all of which showcases the power of love between humans and their pets.

When you stroke or cuddle with your pet, your brain releases oxytocin, and this hormone encourages you to draw closer to your loved ones and helps buffer stress.

Let's not forget the therapeutic roles animals play in our lives. We have come to depend on seeing-eye dogs, canines trained to detect seizures, animals used in occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physical rehabilitation to help us recover. Prisons have dog and horse training programs and preliminary evidence indicates these programs have a powerful positive impact on inmates - improving their sense of purpose, social skills, reducing anxiety and depression, and creating a sense of belonging by contributing to the community.

It isn't just humans who need pets, they need us too. Feeling needed helps them as much as it does us. What we can't lose sight of is that pets require responsible actions from us – they age and that can mean expensive veterinarian care down the road - and when we lose our pets, we face painful grief and loss. But the love they bring can never be overlooked nor how they enriched our lives. It is why so many pet owners continue to have pets throughout their lives. "Pets provide us with a sense of belonging, connection, and contentment for which we all long," explains Dr. Beth Frates, director of lifestyle medicine and wellness in the Department of Surgery at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

Pet ownership can also give us a push to better ourselves. If you can't or don't own a pet, even being around a family or friend's animal can benefit your mental well-being.