

OPINION

Health Benefits from Companion Animals

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Introduction

God created all animals, and they are a gift to the human race and are all on loan to us. Only now are we even beginning to understand what marvelous blessing animals truly are. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) believes that companion animals should be domesticated or domestic-bred animals whose physical, emotional, behavioral and social needs can be readily met as companions in the home, or in close daily relationship with humans. They are kept primarily for a person's company or protection. Dogs, like humans, are highly social animals and pack hunters, this similarity in their overall behavioral design accounts for their train ability, playfulness and ability to fit into human households and social situations. The devotion of dogs to men is unparalleled to the animal world, even in the age of modern and sophisticated instrument and equipment. Dogs have lived with and worked with humans in so many roles that their loyalty has earned them the sobriquet man's best friend.

The cat has been living in close association with humans for at least 3500 years (Rahman, 2014), the ancient Egyptians routinely used cats to keep mice and other rodents away from their grain. The history of domestic cat may stretch back even further, as 8,000 year-old bone of humans and cats were found buried together on the island of Cyprus. Bengal cats are social, extroverted cats that love human companionship and like being part of whatever's going on. They often attach strongly to one person, demanding constant attention from that person. Currently, the cat is the world's most popular household pet (Rahman, 2014).

Professionally trained helper animals—such as guide dogs for the blind—offer obvious benefits to humans. However, the average domestic companion animal, such as a dog, cat—even a goldfish—can also provide many therapeutic and health benefits. Companion animal can ease loneliness, reduce stress, promote social interaction, encourage exercise and playfulness, and provide unconditional love and affection. Caring for a companion animal may even help you live longer.

How companion animal can improve mood and health

While most companion animal owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals, many remain unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of playing with or snuggling up to a furry friend. It's only recently that studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond. The American Heart Association has linked the ownership of companion animals, especially dogs, with a reduced risk for heart disease and greater longevity. (Rahman, 2014)

Studies have also found that:

- Companion animal owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without companion animal.
- People with companion animal have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without companion animal.
- Playing with a companion animal can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.

- Companion animal owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without companion animal.
- Heart attack patients with companion animal survive longer than those without.
- Companion animal owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without companion animal.
- While people with dogs often experience the greatest health benefits, a companion animal 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.

One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that most companion animal fulfills the basic human need to touch. Even hardened criminals in prison have shown long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with companion animals, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, holding, cuddling, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly calm and soothe us when we're stressed. The companionship of a companion animal can also ease loneliness, and some companion animals are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost mood.

How companion animal can help you make healthy lifestyle changes

Adopting healthy lifestyle changes can play an important role in easing symptoms of depression, stress, bipolar disorder, PTSD, and anxiety. Caring for a companion animal can help with those healthy lifestyle changes by:

- **Increasing exercise.** Exercise doesn't have to involve boring repetition at a gym. Taking a dog for a walk, riding a horse, or simply chasing a kitten around are fun ways to fit healthy daily exercise into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners, for example, are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements than non-owners.
- **Providing companionship.** Isolation and loneliness can make disorders such as depression even worse. Caring for a living animal can help make you feel needed and wanted, and take the focus away from your problems, especially if you live alone. Most companion animal owners talk to their pets, some even use them to work through their troubles. And nothing beats loneliness like coming home to a wagging tail or purring cat.
- **Helping meet new people.** Companion animal can be a great social lubricant for their owners. Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each other on walks or in a dog park. Pet owners also meet new people in companion animal stores, clubs, and training classes.
- **Reducing anxiety.** The companionship of an animal such as a dog can offer comfort, help ease anxiety, and build self-confidence for people anxious about going out into the world.

- **Adding structure and routine to your day.** Many companion animals, especially dogs, require a regular feeding and exercise schedule. No matter your mood—depressed, anxious, or stressed—you’ll always have to get out of bed to feed, exercise, and care for your companion animal.
- **Providing sensory stress relief.** Touch and movement are two healthy ways to quickly manage stress. This could involve petting a cat, taking a dog for a walk, or riding a horse.

Companion animal and the health benefits for older adults

The key to aging well is to effectively handle life’s major changes, such as retirement, the loss of loved ones, and the physical changes of aging. Companion animal can play an important role in healthy aging by:

- **Helping you 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 companion animal can bring pleasure and help boost your morale and optimism. Taking care of an animal can also provide a sense of self-worth. Choosing to adopt an animal from a shelter, especially an older dog or cat, can add to the sense of fulfillment, knowing that you’ve provided a home to a companion animal that may otherwise have been euthanized.
- **Staying connected.** Maintaining a social network isn’t always easy as you grow older. Retirement, illness, death, and moves can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder. Dogs especially are a great way for seniors to spark up conversations and meet new people.
- **Boosting vitality.** You can overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging by taking good care of yourself. Companion animal encourage playfulness, laughter, and exercise, which can help boost your immune system and increase your energy.

Even if you’re not able to handle the demands of owning a companion animal, you can still ask to walk a neighbor’s dog, for example, or volunteer at an animal shelter. For a list of organizations that can help older adults adopt an animal and pay for their companion animal’s medical care.

Companion animals and adults with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia

As part of the disease, Alzheimer’s patients may exhibit a wide variety of behavioral problems, many related to an inability to deal with stress.

- Research at the University of California at Davis School of Veterinary Medicine concluded that Alzheimer’s patients suffer less stress and have fewer anxious outbursts if there is a companion animal in the home.
- Companion animal can provide a source of positive, nonverbal communication. The playful interaction and gentle touch from a well-trained, docile animal can help soothe an Alzheimer’s patient and decrease aggressive behavior.
- In many cases a patient’s problem behavior is a reaction to the stressed response of the primary caretaker. Companion animal can help ease the stress of caregivers. Cats or caged animals may be more suitable than dogs, which generally require more care and can add to the burden of someone who’s already looking after an Alzheimer’s patient.

Companion animal and the health benefits for children

Not only do children who grow up with companion animals have less risk of allergies and asthma, many also learn responsibility, compassion, and empathy from having companion animals. Unlike parents, companion animals are never critical and don’t give orders. They are always loving and their mere presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. Having an ever-present dog or cat, for example, can help ease separation anxiety in children when mom and dad aren’t around. Studies have also shown that companion animals can help calm hyperactive or overly aggressive kids. Of course, both the companion animal and the child need to be trained to behave appropriately with each other.

Children and adults alike can benefit from playing with companion animal, which can be both a source of calmness and relaxation, as well as a source of stimulation for the brain and body. Playing with a companion animal can even be a doorway to learning for a child. It can

stimulate a child’s imagination and curiosity. The rewards of training a dog to perform a new trick, for example, can teach kids the importance of perseverance. Caring for a furry friend can also offer another benefit to a child: immense joy.

Children with learning and other disorders

Some children with autism or other learning difficulties are better able to interact with companion animals than people. Autistic children often rely on nonverbal cues to communicate, just as companion animals do. And learning to first connect with a cat or dog, for example, may even help an autistic child in their interactions with people.

- Companion animal 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 companion animal 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.
- Learning to ride a horse can help elevate the self-esteem of disabled children, putting them on a more equal level with kids without disabilities.

Finding a companion animal that meets your needs and lifestyle

While people who have companion animals tend to be happier, more independent, and feel more secure than those without companion animals, it’s important to select the type of companion animal that is best for you. You’ll benefit most from having a companion animal whose needs are compatible with your lifestyle and physical capabilities.

Lifestyle considerations that influence your choice in a companion animal

- **Little outdoor activity** – If most of your time is spent at home, consider companion animals that would be happy to stay with you in that environment. You may enjoy playing with or cuddling a cat or a bunny; taking leisurely walks with an older dog; watching fish or reptiles; or talking or singing along with a bird.
- **High activity level** – If you’re more active and enjoy daily activities outside of your home, especially walking or running, an energetic dog might be right for you. Canine companions thrive on outdoor exercise, keeping you on the move.
- **Small children and the elderly** – Families with small children or elderly living in their homes should consider the size and energy level of a companion animal. Puppies and kittens are usually very active, but delicate creatures that must be handled with care. Large or rambunctious dogs could accidentally harm or knock over a small child or adult who is unsteady on his or her feet.
- **Other animals in household** – Consider the ongoing happiness and ability to adjust of the companion animals you already have. While your cat or a dog might love to have an animal friend to play with, a companion animal that has had exclusive access to your attentions may resent sharing you.
- **Home environment** – If a neat, tidy home, free of animal hair, occasional muddy footprints and “accidents” is important, then a free-roaming dog or long-haired cat may not be the best choice. You may want to choose pets that are confined to their quarters, such as fish, birds, hamsters, or reptiles.
- **Landscaping concerns** – With certain companion animals, your landscaping will suffer. Many dogs will be tempted to dig holes in your lawn, and dog urine can leave yellow patches—some say unaltered females cause the most damage.
- **Time commitment** – Finally, and perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that you’ll be making a commitment that will last the lifetime of the companion animal - perhaps 10, 15, or 20 years with a dog or cat; as many as 30 years or more with a bird. You can, of course, consider adopting an older dog or cat from a shelter or rescue group and provide a deserving animal with a loving home for its senior years.

Owning a companion animals not for everyone

Having a companion animals not a miracle cure for mental illness. Owning a companion animal is beneficial and comforting only for those who love and appreciate domestic animals. If you’re simply not a

“companion animal person,” companion animal ownership is not going to provide you with any therapeutic benefits or improve your life. For other people, owning a pet may simply not be practical. Some of the drawbacks are:

- **Companion animal scost money.** Food bills, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses can mount up. If you’re unemployed or elderly, on a limited fixed income, it may be a struggle to cope with the expense of companion animal ownership.
- **Companion animal require time and attention.** As any dog owner will tell you, there’s nothing therapeutic about coming home to a dog that has been locked up in the house on his own all day long. Dogs need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced; most other companion animals require at least daily care and attention. Companion animals can even curb some social activity, as they can only be left alone for a limited time.
- **Companion animals can be destructive.** Any companion animal can have an occasional accident at home. Some cats may be prone to shredding upholstery, some dogs to chewing shoes. While training can help eradicate negative, destructive behavior, they remain common in animals left alone without exercise or stimulation for long periods of time.
- **Companion animals require responsibility.** Most dogs, regardless of size and breed, are capable of inflicting injury on people if not handled responsibly by their owners. Even cats can scratch or bite. Pet owners need to be alert to any danger, especially around children.
- **Companion animals carry health risks for some people.** While there are some diseases that can be transmitted from cats and dogs to their human handlers, allergies are the most common health risk of companion animal ownership. If you or a family member has been diagnosed with a pet allergy, carefully consider whether you can live with the symptoms before committing to companion animal ownership. Also consider that some friends or relatives with allergies may no longer be able to visit your home if you have a companion animal.

Reducing health risks from a companion animal

Kids, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for getting sick from animals. Take these steps to reduce your risk:

- Wash hands thoroughly after contact with animals.
- Keep your companion animal clean and healthy, and keep vaccinations up to date.
- Supervise children under age 5 while they’re interacting with animals.
- Prevent kids from kissing their companion animal or putting their hands or other objects in their mouths after touching animals.
- Avoid changing litter boxes during pregnancy. Problem pregnancies may arise from toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease spread by exposure to cat feces.

Reference

Rahman, M. S. (2014). Small and Laboratory Animal Medicine, a textbook of Small and Laboratory Animal Medicine. Third Edition, ISBN 978-984-33-6081-6, Copy Right Registration Number 13054-COPR, Prithul and Piya Publication, 17/12A1 Pallabi, Mirpur 12, Dhaka 1216, Bangladesh.