

Pets for Depression and Health

By Kathleen Doheny

Can your depression problems improve when you interact with your pet?

Traffic was unbearable; the workday was long, and the boss unreasonable. But minutes later, as your pet dog wags his tail and yips his welcome or your cat purrs while rubbing against your legs, your symptoms of depression lift.

It's not a coincidence, according to psychologists, veterinarians, and researchers, who concur that pets can be good for our mental and physical health. A pet can't cure symptoms of depression, of course, nor is a pet a substitute for medication or talk therapy. But a pet can help to improve mild or moderate depression in many people, experts agree, as well as provide other benefits, such as better sleep and overall health.

Pets and Depression: What Therapists Say

Pets offer psychological and physical comfort, says Teri Wright, PhD, a psychologist in Santa Ana, Calif., who keeps a parakeet and two hamsters in her office to break the ice with children she treats -- but finds that adults like them, too.

Pets, she says, "just feel good to hold on to." Psychologically, she says, "they make you feel important, like you matter." How, for instance, could you not feel better when your dog wags his tail and pants upon your return or your cat jumps in your lap and purrs, even if you've just returned from a half-hour errand?

Wright has two guinea pigs, Dex (for Dexadrin, the ADHD drug) and Zac (short for Prozac), and feels pretty important when they squeal upon her return home. "No one else gives them parsley," she says of their favorite snack.

The Power of Pets for Improving Your Mood and Health

The power of pets in improving mood can be summed up in two words, says Alan Entin, PhD, a psychologist in Richmond, Va.: "Unconditional love."

Dogs, in particular, are always glad to see you, he notes. "When you are feeling down and out, the puppy just starts licking you, being with you, saying with his eyes, 'You are the greatest.' When an animal is giving you that kind of attention, you can't help but respond by improving your mood and playing with it."

Besides unconditional loves, a pet relieves loneliness, Entin points out. Depression and loneliness can go together as people withdraw. "For many people pets are the only relatives they have. It relieves their loneliness. People with animals tend to relate to them and they feel better."

Having a pet takes the focus off the owner's problems, Entin says, since having a pet is a commitment--you need to feed and care for the pet. "When people have a pet in the house, it

forces them to take care of another life," Entin says. With the focus outward, he says, the pet owner may not dwell on their depressed mood as much.

The pet doesn't have to be a dog or a cat. British psychiatrist Camilla Haw, in fact, recommends pet parrots as ideal pets for some patients with symptoms of depression. "I have kept pet parrots for 20 years and can recommend them for the house bound, the lonely and patients with depression, especially middle-aged women suffering from the 'empty nest syndrome,'" she writes in *Psychiatric Bulletin*. The birds can be loyal, loving, and provide good companionship, she says.

Pets and Depression: Veterinarians Weigh In

Pets often serve as confidantes, says Bonnie V. Beaver, DVM, a professor of veterinary medicine at Texas A&M University.

Pets also can increase social exposure for their owners -- another good way to boost mood, she says. Dogs need walks, and that gets their owners out with other people, inspiring social contacts.

"People talk to people with animals," she says, more so than people without pets.

Easing Stress with Your Pet

Pets help your mental health primarily by decreasing your stress, believes Richard Timmins, DVM, of Camano Island, Wash., and director of the Association for Veterinary Family Practice. Just petting your animals can be soothing, he and others say.

Having a pet in the house can change the entire ambience, as Timmins has discovered. His parents, when they were both 83, decided to adopt a "boutique mutt," a shih tzu-bichon mix. Timmins and his four siblings were concerned that the puppy would be too much work.

"My mother had difficulty with mobility and we worried the dog would trip her," he says. "My dad had had cardiac problems and a hip replaced."

Turns out, the dog was anything but a problem. While his parents weren't depressed, they had become less interested in activities, Timmins says. The dog changed all that. "Now they are outside walking the dog a couple times a day. It has given my mother and father topics to discuss with golf buddies."

Pets and Health: The Research

Studies about the mental health and physical health benefits of pets abound. Among the more recent findings:

- The overall health of dog or cat owners is better than those who don't have dogs or cats, according to a study that evaluated women ages 25 to 40 in China. Half of the 3,031 women owned dogs and half did not. Those who had dogs exercised more often, slept

better, reported better fitness levels and fewer sick days, and saw their doctors less often. The study is in *Social Indicators Research*.

- Pets provide opportunities for social contact, according to a study in *Social Science & Medicine*, and that can be good for someone down in the dumps. Researchers asked 339 adults in Western Australia about their social contact and pet ownership. The pet owners interacted more with neighbors than non-owners.
- Having a dog or cat -- and petting it -- may be good for your cardiovascular system, although this research has yielded mixed results. In one study, however, pet owners had lower blood pressure and blood fat levels than non-owners, researchers report in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. Other research hasn't found a difference in blood pressure levels among pet owners and non-owners.

Pets and Depression: Caveats

Pets help most when symptoms of depression are mild or moderate, psychologists say.

"If you are already so depressed you can't take care of yourself, having an animal is going to make it worse," says Wright.

Another caveat: If someone is not a "pet person," getting one is not likely to help improve their life, says Timmins. "There are some people who have not had that pet experience growing up," he says. "They've never had a relationship with an animal. They would be less likely to benefit."

"But if the conditions are right, pets can help mental health," he says. "The benefits have been shown for all kinds of pets," he said, not just dogs and cats. Even watching fish in an aquarium has been shown to help reduce muscle tension and pulse rate, he says, citing research published nearly 20 years ago.