

The power of pets

The influence of pets is powerful across the life course (Fields, 2013). They help teach children responsibility and lessons about living and death. They can bring cheer and distraction during times of stress. They keep families talking. They help combat loneliness and can reduce anxiety. They serve as companions and work as service animals for those who live with disabilities. They encourage a healthy lifestyle and promote a sense of purpose as animals need to be fed, walked, groomed, and loved. Pets promote physical activity which enhances energy levels, decreases the risk of heart disease, keeps bones healthy and strong, and supports the immune system (MedLinePlus, 2020). Pets can be fun. They make you smile and laugh. But pets are also a lot of work and can be expensive (Negron, 2012). Pets take time. Pets need to fit your lifestyle. Pets need training. Homes need to be pet friendly and the pet needs to be appropriate for your family or situation. With anything new, there is an adjustment period.

During a pandemic, when emotional strain runs high, pets are powerful because they are present. Research demonstrates that people naturally turn to their pets for support in times of angst (Rajewski, 2020). This is because pets can help with so much:

- Combat social isolation and loneliness
- Offer nonjudgmental emotional support
- Provide a mood boost
- Tap your senses (touch)
- Help with maintaining a routine and sense of normalcy
- Provide distraction or keep you going
- Contribute to mental health

While research on human-animal interaction is still relatively new (NIH, 2018), we do know for certain that pets help people to keep going.

References:

- Rajewski, G. (2020, March 30). Tufts Now. How Animals Help Us During the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://now.tufts.edu/articles/how-animals-help-us-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- Fields, L. (2013). WebMD. 6 ways pets can improve your health. Retrieved from <https://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/features/6-ways-pets-improve-your-health#1>
- MedlinePlus. (2020). Exercise and immunity. Retrieved from <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007165.htm>
- Negron, V. (2012). PetMD. 10 things to consider before bringing a new pet home. Retrieved from https://www.petmd.com/dog/care/evr_multi_10_things_consider_before_pet_adoption
- NIH. (2018). The power of pets: Health benefits of human-animal interaction. Retrieved from <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/02/power-pets>

Sources:

Amy F. Kostelic, Adult Development and Aging Specialist; Natalie Jones, Family Health Specialist, and Mindy McCulley, Instructional Support Specialist