



The Power of *Pets*

They're not only cute and cuddly—they can help you stay healthy

By Wendy Haaf

If you share your home with an animal, you may be getting more out of the relationship than warm fuzzy feelings and fur on your furniture. According to a growing body of research, living with a pet could potentially protect our physical and mental health in a number of ways, particularly later in life.

While the pet-human partnership can have its downsides, from expense and effort to heartbreak over the loss of a beloved companion, the benefits may go far beyond an enthusiastic welcome when you get home. In fact, researchers even have a name for the positive role of pets in promoting human health: “zooeiyia” (*zoo-eh-ah*). Here are a handful of examples illustrating zooeiyia’s potential.

Stress Relief

Spending time with a dog—even a dog you’ve never met before—decreases stress. For example, in a study involving 400 university students, those who interacted with a therapy dog for 20 to 30 minutes experienced a reduction in stress levels and some of the relaxing effects were still evident 10 hours later, says Stanley Coren, a professor emeritus in the psychology department at the University of British Columbia.

“These interactions tend to slow the heart rate and lower blood pressure; the muscles relax and breathing becomes more regular,” Coren says. “Recent data shows even stress hormones are reduced and oxytocin,

which is sometimes called ‘the love hormone,’ is increased. A lot of these effects are similar to what you get from something like the antidepressant drug Prozac—so this is like Prozac on paws.” Unlike these medications, however, which take weeks to begin working, the effects kick in within just minutes. Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that “if you have a dog, the likelihood you’ll go into clinical depression is reduced fourfold,” compared with people who don’t live with canine companions, Coren says.

Part of the effect on mood may stem from the fact that activities such as simply watching a pet play “help you get out of yourself,” says Dr. Katherine Hodgson, a researcher in the continuing professional development department at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Medicine. “Things like grooming a pet are really a form of mindfulness.”

Stronger Social Bonds

“Pets help build social capital just like the relationships that we have, which we know are a huge determinant of health,” Hodgson says. “For example, a lonely rich person is more likely to be sicker than a person of lower socioeconomic status who has a strong network of family, friends, and community.”

First of all, there’s the companionship that comes from the animal itself. “People who have low levels of social support tend to experience particular benefits from having a pet,” says Ann

Scientists have begun to look at ways that health professionals can recruit the family pet as a personalized health coach.

Toohey, the scientific coordinator of the Brenda Strafford Centre on Aging at the O’Brien Institute for Public Health, part of the University of Calgary’s Cumming School of Medicine. (Toohey is also the lead author on a paper that used data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging to better understand the characteristics of older people who are living with pets.)

For example, in a study that probed how acquiring a pet affected feelings

of isolation in older adults, “lonelier people were more likely to acquire a pet and having a pet seemed to help with loneliness,” Toohey says. And that’s not frivolous, since loneliness appears to pose an even greater risk to health than obesity. Caring for a furry or feathery family member can also provide a sense of purpose, a trait that’s been linked with healthy aging. “It doesn’t necessarily replace the desire for human companionship,” Toohey says, “but it does make life a lot better.” In fact, Toohey is concerned that a lack of pet-friendly housing for low-income seniors can have negative consequences when people are faced with the wrenching prospect of having to part with a much-loved companion to keep a roof over their heads.

And while the responsibilities of living with a companion animal can sometimes curtail participation in social activities, pets seem to have the power to foster a wider, stronger social network. For example, if you have nothing in common with a relative, her cockatiel may provide a topic of conversation. This gambit can open a dialogue that bolsters relationships between health professionals and patients, too. In a study funded by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute and conducted by Hodgson and colleagues, when health professionals

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made a point of asking patients if they had a pet and, if so, to provide a few details, 70 per cent of participants reported learning more about their patients, 83 per cent said it led to an increased knowledge of patients' physical activity levels, and 48 per cent said it helped foster better rapport. This is no small matter, since research has shown that stronger relationships between people and their doctors can improve patient health.

Other research has found that neighbourhoods with features that encourage people with pets to mingle—such as dog parks—have stronger feelings of connection, as measured by questions such as “Could you ask your neighbour for a cup of sugar?”, even when controlling for other factors, such as socio-economic differences. Similarly, a study by Toohey found older people are more apt to feel secure enough to walk outdoors when they live in an area boasting an abundance of dog-walkers.

Healthier Behaviours

Living with a pet may cultivate health-promoting behaviours in other ways, too. Some studies, for instance, suggest that “dogs can actually motivate people to get out in spite of bad weather,” says Clarise Lim, a fitness instructor in Victoria who is a co-author of two studies involving dog-walking and the author of another.

Other research hints that dogs may also decrease sedentary time, which is a risk factor for a number of health ills. In addition, the daily tasks of animal care, such as feeding, can encourage routines that contribute to overall health. For instance, a pet's schedule may require you go to bed and get up at consistent times, habits that help strengthen the kinds of healthy sleep patterns that are linked with a lower likelihood of a number of serious health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

PORTRAIT OF OLDER PET OWNERS

Canadian researchers are laying the groundwork to better understand how companion animals affect the health of people 65 and over. To do so, some of the first things they needed to find out were the characteristics of older Canadians who live with pets. For instance, do they tend to have more social advantages that are linked with better health, such as a higher income? (One of the criticisms that has been levelled at some of the existing studies is that the apparent benefits of pets might actually be due at least in part to these other factors.) Using data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging, they discovered that pet-owning seniors are “a very diverse group,” notes Ann Toohey, the scientific coordinator of the Brenda Strafford Centre on Aging at the O'Brien Institute for Public Health, part of the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine. For instance:

- **Just over 30%** of seniors in the lowest income bracket had pets.
- **Just under 25%** of older adults who rent their homes had pets.
- **Close to 30%** of older adults living alone had pets.
- **More than 25%** of older adults belonging to an ethnic minority had pets.
- **Nearly 50%** of people identifying as LGBTQ+ had pets.

Stanley Coren tells a personal story about how this knowledge, plus a bit of subterfuge, helped coax his father, who lived alone, to start eating again regularly after he began missing meals; family members convinced the elder Coren that a simple scratch-cooking formula (one-third protein, one-third vegetables, and one-third breads and starches) would help keep his King Charles spaniel healthy. Motivated to cook for his dog, Coren's father was tempted to eat the leftovers.

Scientists have even begun to look at ways that health professionals can recruit the family pet as a sort of personalized health coach. In a study conducted by Lim, for example, strategies that included attending scheduled group dog-walking sessions helped participants increase their levels of physical activity, and even three weeks after the study had ceased, subjects were still getting double the recommended 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week. “A lot of them reflected that they really enjoyed it

and that it was more fun than if they'd been out on their own,” Lim says.

One of the most-studied areas of pets as catalysts for healthier behaviours is smoking cessation. “Health-care providers can use discussions around protecting the pet from second-hand smoke as a motivator” to cut down on smoking and even quit entirely, Hodgson says.

“Pets can actually be part of treatment plans,” Hodgson adds. For instance, “petting an animal or walking with an animal can be part of an approach to addressing anxiety or recovery from cardiac surgery.” She and her colleagues have come up with a series of worksheets that build on this concept, using pets as exercise buddies, mindfulness partners, and a focus for something called “solution-based therapy.” Aimed at helping tame anxiety and depression, solution-based therapy involves scheduling specific activities that a person—or in this case, a pet—finds pleasurable. “For example, if your cat loves to play

treasure hunt,” Hodgson explains, “you might plan to do that on Saturday mornings, and when you do it, you get the pleasure of watching your cat,” as well as the positive feedback from the cat’s enjoyment.



Reduced Health Risks

Finally, the creatures that find their way into our hearts may actually protect the health of that very organ.

For starters, there’s some evidence that, compared with those not living with animals, pet owners tend to have lower levels of three risk factors for heart disease—high blood pressure, high triglycerides, and high LDL cholesterol. Similarly, in a number of studies, pet owners’ hearts responded in a healthier way to mental stress, with less marked and shorter-lasting increases in heart rate and blood pressure.

People whose hearts have already been dealt a serious blow may reap even more profound benefits from a pet’s presence. In light of the knowledge that high levels of stress are associated with cardiovascular disease and stroke, and that interacting with dogs moderates stress, a US researcher decided to track a group of people aged 55 to 65 who had just suffered a first heart attack, comparing those with furry roommates to their pet-free peers. The research showed that when people in this situation live with pets, “they are seven times more likely than those without pets to be alive after four years,” Coren says.

Pets aren’t pills—they come with individual personalities and sets of needs, all of which must be carefully weighed before deciding to adopt an animal. Moreover, the primary reason for doing so should be to give an animal a loving home. Still, the possible health perks are another plus, besides snuggles and slobbery kisses, to keep in mind the next time you drag yourself out of bed at the crack of dawn to let Rover out or to feed Fluffy. ■

Sudoku

By Étienne Hannequart-Ferron

Fill in the empty boxes of the grid using the numbers 1 through 9 without repeating any of the numbers. Each square of 9 boxes is delineated with bold lines. Several numbers have been placed to get you started. You may not repeat the numbers 1 through 9 in the same row or column or in the same square of 9 boxes.

Puzzle #1 Intermediate

4	8			5	1			7
3	9			8			4	
		1				9		6
					9	3	6	5
	3	5		2		7		4
	4							
1					5			
			2		8			
		4	7			1		

Puzzle #2 Intermediate

	8	4	9					5
1	2					7		
				4		3		
			5	1				
	5	6		8				1
			6					4
		5	2				9	
	4				1	8		
		9		5			3	

You’ll find the solutions to this month’s puzzles on page 16.