

Pet Lovers—Why We’re Probably Healthier Than Everyone Else

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There are two kinds of humans: pet lovers and people I don’t want to know. LOL, I’m kidding of course! I have friends who, for a variety of reasons (allergies, expense, time constraints, etc.) choose to be pet-less. Pet ownership may not be for everyone, but a majority of Americans are committed pet lovers. An estimated 68% of U.S. households has at least one pet.¹

Millions of Shelter Animals are Waiting for a Pet-loving Family

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) estimates that 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters every year (3.3 million dogs and 3.2 million cats). Each year, about 670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats are euthanized. About 3.2 million shelter animals are adopted each year (1.6 million dogs and 1.6 million cats).

More Resources:

[ASPCA, “Adoption Tips”](#)

[The Humane Society, “The Adoption Process: Questions to Ask Yourself”](#)

Friendship and companionship are common motivations for pet adoption, though researchers are examining the impact that human-animal relationships have on individuals.

Studies show that the bond between pet lovers and animals can enhance health.

Over the years, numerous studies² have demonstrated that pets can lower blood pressure, increase social behaviors in children with autism, relieve stress, encourage physical activity, improve one-year survival rates following heart attacks, and may be responsible for reducing cardiovascular disease risk.³

Animals also comfort people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Enter the emotional support animal (ESA). ESAs have become so common that they’re part of the landscape of grocery stores, restaurants and airports. This year I’ve traveled by air a half-dozen times, and on each trip I’ve seen passengers cradling or stroking their emotional support animals (usually dogs and the occasional cat, and at least one gerbil). While waiting to board a plane at LaGuardia International in New York a month ago, I stood in line next to a man and a cockapoo, who wore a red dog vest embroidered with “support animal.”

“I don’t know where I’d be without Charlie,” the man told me when I admired the dog.

“How does he help you?” I asked, although in hindsight it was a dumb question considering that Charlie was thumping his tail, leaning against my leg and nuzzling my hand as I chatted with his owner. I felt my blood

pressure drop from its typical airport hysteria level to normal.

PET ADOPTION STORY

How Do you Mend a Broken Heart?

Keiren's Story.

We adopted Ruby several months after our faithful companion, Cocoa, passed away. We had used a breeder before, but this time we wanted a rescue. We contacted Puppies and More, a local non-profit that transports unwanted and abandoned animals, many from high-kill shelters in the south. Ruby was rescued after being found in the woods with her 3 siblings.

The vetting process to adopt Ruby was intense. They called all our references, every vet we have ever used, and even Google-Earthed our house! Their rationale is that these pets have been so traumatized that they don't want to rehome them again. When I saw Ruby's photo, I knew we had to give her a loving home. She mended our broken hearts and brings us joy every single day. We are weirdly obsessed with this little mutt! My husband's Christmas gift was her DNA panel!

The man took his time responding to my question. "How does Charlie help me? Well, I'm a Vietnam veteran." He didn't need to say anything else—his message was clear. Charlie helps him deal with painful memories.

"Dogs are very present. If someone is struggling with something, they know how to sit there and be loving," said Dr. Ann Berger, a physician and researcher at the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Dr. Berger works with people who have cancer and terminal illnesses. "Their attention is focused on the person all the time."

The bond between animals and people is a mutually beneficial relationship, according to Pet Partners, a non-profit that promotes the use of animals to help

humans cope with life. Therapy animals soothe seniors with Alzheimer's, raise the confidence of people who have literacy challenges and intellectual disabilities, calm patients who are in recovery, and help the dying. Pet Partners registers handlers of multiple animal species who provide animal-assisted interventions. One of the organization's goals has been to establish rigorous standards⁴ for animals and their human handlers to ensure safe and effective therapy animal visits.

Of course, pets don't have to serve only as prescribed medicine for specific needs or voids. They can sometimes serve in other ways. Take Sophie for instance, who at 13 is a committed pet lover. As much as she enjoys relaxing and playing with the three dogs and two cats that share her home, she is also interested in animals that aren't the typical fur-covered variety. That's how she came to adopt Lizzie, a bearded dragon.

PET ADOPTION STORY

Senior Animals Need Love, Too;

Denise's Story.

I grew up with dogs. As I grew older, I felt that adopting a senior dog made more sense than a puppy. I adopted Toby, an 8-year-old abandoned Lhasa Apso in September 2012. In June 2015 I adopted Chico, a rescue Chihuahua, also 8 years old. I enjoy helping my senior dogs live a good life in the suburbs. Plus they keep me active outside of work. They have very different personalities. Toby loves to walk after his dinner each night and Chico loves to hoard his half-eaten rawhides in his bed.

I've also been taking care of a neighborhood cat, Mr. Grey, whose owners have pretty much abandoned him to our street. Myself and another neighbor, Paul, watch over Mr. Grey, feed him, keep his shots up-to-date and bring him inside when weather is bad.

“I chose a bearded dragon because they are such cuddly and cute animals,” Sophie said. “They are the perfect pal to hang out with because they are so happy to be with you.”

Lizzie feeds Sophie’s creativity. The lizard has starred in more than two dozen movies, short videos and film trailers, with Sophie serving as scriptwriter, camera operator, director and voice-over actor. Sophie has provided Lizzie’s care, feeding and comfort for several years. As the lizard’s primary caregiver, Sophie understands the importance of responsibility and commitment. “Lizzie is an extraordinary friend,” she said.

Whether living life as cherished pets, working as emotional comfort, therapy, or service companions, dogs, cats and other critters serve a higher purpose: they show pet lovers how to love unconditionally.

Sophie summed up the bond she has with her bearded dragon: “One morning I woke up and the weirdest thing happened—Lizzie smiled at me!” she said. “She makes my world go ‘round every single day.”

I’ve asked other pet lovers to share their thoughts about their animal friends:

Missy: Our German Shepherd Beau provides comfort and consoles you when you had a bad day or if you are not feeling well.

Dina: My sweet Yorkiepoo/Cockapoo Pennie has brought me a surreal sense of calm, positivity and confidence for the past 14 years.

Stephanie: Our Golden Retriever Trevor is always there to comfort the kids when they are feeling sad or are sick.

Alina: The best part about our cat Basil is that she’s an adorable distraction to the rigors of daily life.

PET ADOPTION STORY

An Heir and a Spare; Ellen's Story.

Our hearts were broken when our brown tabby Queen Charlotte, 12, died in 2017. A few months later we found 7-month-old Spencer at a Pet Smart adoption center. Spencer, who looked nearly identical to Charlotte, was sharing a cage with a white kitten named Papillion. We decided to adopt Spencer, but we just couldn't leave Papillion behind because the cats were obviously friends. So we took them both home.

Today, Spencer is a 13-pound goofball comedian who fetches toys, chases her tail and begs to be carried around. Papillion, a Van tabby with luxurious bunny fur, stretches on her back and demands tummy rubs whenever a human passes by. We are twice blessed.

¹ [National Institutes of Health](#), “The Power of Pets”

² [Petpartners.org](#), “Health Benefits of the Human-Animal Bond Research Citations”

³ [Petpartners.org](#), “Benefits of the Human-Animal Bond”

⁴ [Petpartners.org](#), “Position on Therapy Animal Health and Welfare”

Visit [HealthDiscovery.org](#) for related topics.