

Pets & Mental Health

By PetER

You undoubtedly love your pets. They are a source of loads of entertainment and joy, but they may also be good for your physical and mental health. It's true, nearly 90% of pet owners say that their pets have a positive impact on their mental health by reducing stress, being a calming presence, and offering companionship and support. You've likely experienced the strong connection between pets and mental health. Here, we'll talk about why.

Oxytocin is known as the "love hormone" because it plays a major role in emotional regulation and social bonding, so it's no wonder that being with your pet feels good. Just seeing your pet can help, but the physical interaction is really where it's at when it comes to reducing stress and anxiety and boosting your mood. Let's dive into this in a little more detail.

Dogs

Dogs and Mental Health

Petting your dog is great at reducing stress, but the mental and physical health benefits don't end there. In fact, dogs make great companions, not because they can offer you advice, but because of their loyalty.

Once you've bonded with a dog, they can truly become your perpetual sidekick, accompanying you on trips and even boosting your social life. How exactly? Well, dogs require exercise and some form of training, both of which are prime opportunities to meet like-minded dog lovers and potential new friends.

On that exercise note, dogs are great for getting you up and moving. Every dog, no matter the size, requires at the very least a daily walk, something that can supercharge your mood, lower your blood pressure, and work your heart and muscles in a very good way. Some dogs can be relentless about exercise, meaning there's no excuse for you not to accompany them in some movement every day.

If you need to hear even more ways that dogs can help your mental health, consider this: caring for a dog requires a lot of responsibility. While that might not sound exactly like something you're looking for more of, being accountable for something or someone is important for all of us, no matter what our age. Caring for a dog gives us a sense of purpose that can have a positive effect on mental health.

To sum up, dogs are great for mental health because they:

- Reduce stress
- Offer companionship
- Increase social interactions
- Give purpose and responsibility
- Increase exercise

With all of these benefits, it should come as no surprise that dogs are used for therapy. Of course, there are the tried and true seeing eye dogs, but a dog's ability to help goes far beyond that. Therapy dogs are also used to help people with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, PTSD, and to provide companionship.

Cats

Cats and Mental Health

Our feline friends aren't to be outdone when it comes to benefiting mental health. Though they may not increase your social circle by dragging you to the dog park, they can reduce anxiety, have a calming effect, and even speed up healing with a simple purr.

The low-frequency vibrations produced by a cat purr help to stimulate the release of oxytocin and decrease cortisol to reduce stress and boost mood. Cat purrs also activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which encourages the body to de-escalate and rest.

Not only do cats help you to calm down, they also cover the responsibility base, making a person feel needed, but in a lower-maintenance way than dogs. In other words, a cat needs you to care for them, but they don't require daily outings or frequent bathroom breaks.

Cats are also great backers of mental health by:

- Providing a purpose and sense of responsibility
- Having a calming effect
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Actually helping to heal by simply purring
- Being low maintenance, so they can provide these benefits without any hassle

Now, you're not going to see a cat in a service vest at the grocery store, but therapy cats are the real deal.

Pets and Mental Health for Different Age Groups

Everyone's mental health can benefit from cats and dogs, but some ages are more targeted than others.

Pets and Kids/Teens

Pets and kids often go hand in hand. Pets make great playmates and even confidants for kids. They can help build confidence by teaching kids responsibility while being resilient enough to allow a child to learn from their mistakes. Further studies are also looking at how pets can help with ADHD, autism, and child development.

Pets can also help teens navigate the ups and downs of adolescence by helping with hormonal regulation that plays a part in regulating their emotional response, and they can even reduce stress and anxiety in college students.

Pets and Seniors

The companionship of a dog or cat may be most important in older adults, for as we retire from work and our children grow up, connecting with people may be more difficult. There may also be a shakeup in the normal routine that has senior citizens looking for a purpose and some responsibility in their lives.

Even if an older adult can't take care of a pet full-time, they can still benefit from periodic visits through therapy programs where animals are brought in to interact with seniors. This allows them to get the benefits of this bonding without providing permanent care.