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Pets and Your Health in the Time of COVID-19

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Opinion

Each day as I attach a rope to the harness of my 11-pound dog, I am grateful to have a pet during this period of stay at home while I wait for news that the COVID19 crisis will abate. This little creature gives me a reason to get up in the morning when I cannot go to work (she insists on being taken out and then fed). She quietly, or not so quietly, encourages me to walk the daily 10,000 steps I have committed to for my health. She bugs me until we get outside into the sunshine and get the walk done. She cavorts, jumps a foot in the air, chases rabbits and lizards which she cannot catch, and generally exhibits a zest for life which some days seems to elude me. Just being around her makes me feel better.

Did you know this is not unusual for those who have pets? There are at least 6 ways in which having a pet can improve human health. According to an article in WebMD 2013 associating with pets can decrease blood pressure to closer to normal limits and improve heart health, sooth stress, increase the likelihood of having a positive social life, increase mood and give better meaning to your life, and even benefit children by strengthening baby's immune system and giving social support for autistic children [1].

Let's look at the heart. Dog owners usually must walk their dogs. Those who do walk more than others, and as a result have lower blood pressure than people who don't have dogs. Lower blood pressure is generally easier on the heart.

People with heart problems benefit from owning a pet. Studies show that heart attack survivors tend to live longer than those who do not have pets.

Having a pet can decrease stress in your life. According to one article Alan Beck, ScD, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University, says petting your cat or dog feels good, helps the body release a hormone which results in relaxation, and cuts down on levels of a stress hormone. This also helps to lower blood pressure.

A study in 2019 at Washington State University showed that for stressed college students there was a significant reduction in cortisol, a stress hormone, after just 10 minutes of interacting with a dog or cat. This according to Patricia Pendry, an associate professor in the Department of Human Development at Washington State University. With lowered cortisol comes lowered blood pressure [2].

A side benefit to interacting with a pet is that the pet is soothed, too. My dog tends to fall asleep if I pet her very long. Bored or soothed? She has not yet told me. Unfortunately, I am not Dr. Doolittle, and can't talk to the animals, or at least understand in human language what they are saying.

You don't have to be Dr. Doolittle to talk to your pet though. Most of us talk to our pets, if only to call them for dinner, even if we don't want to admit it. It seems to kind of come naturally after a while.

My husband talks baby talk to our little dog, surprising since he did not use baby talk to communicate with the children when they were young. But he seems to also be soothed as he soothes and commiserates with the dog. He and the dog both fall asleep.

You may have to skip the social life positive influence your pet can have for now. Social distancing and masks seem to inhibit people walking up to you as you walk your cute, beautiful, or handsome dog. However, sometimes just a wave and pleasant “hello” from 6 feet away can lift your spirits and those of the person you hail. If you weren’t walking the dog, you wouldn’t have seen that neighbor at all, now would you? So there may still be some socializing benefit because you have a pet.

Studies show that people with pets tend to visit the doctor less often with minor complaints. Perhaps they are more resilient in general. They are usually more trusting and less lonely than those who lack a pet. How can you be lonely with a warm bundle of fur on your lap or your pillow? You always have someone nearby who will listen to you. Generally, people with pets are happier, too. Maybe because pets make us laugh. Who can resist a smile at the 2 kittens tussling around a ball of yarn, or a dog chasing a butterfly? Maybe pets give you a sense of meaning or belonging. After all, everyone knows that people don’t own cats. Cats own their people. Just ask the cat.

But what about the reports in the media about animals transmitting COVID19 to humans, or vice versa? Should that give pause to one considering getting a pet? A recent article in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association stated, “there is evidence that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the COVID19 virus) from humans to dogs and cats is uncommon, and that it is “critically important that pet owners not overreact to these few cases involving animals that test positive, and that pet owners do

not abandon their pets.” In other words, if you don’t have COVID19, your pet is VERY UNLIKELY to have it either, or to give it to you. Some cities are reporting that more animals are being adopted out of shelters during the pandemic [3]. Apparently there are people who consider the positive benefits to owning a pet more important than the vague media hyped idea that pets can spread COVID19. Most people who already own pets would agree.

Even if you do not have children, and even though you must social distance and wear a mask, the other benefits - healthier heart and blood pressure, stress soothing, better mood and more meaning, waving at your neighbour, someone to talk to - make having a pet a good thing to consider during a time when we must all stay at home, cannot follow all our normal routines, and are full of angst for both the present and future.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of interest.

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