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Why having a pet can prove beneficial for the health of the owner

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THE sun has appeared and suddenly taking the dog out doesn't seem like such a chore.

But while we all know that pets can be great a motivating force for keeping fit - with the average dog-owner exercising their pet for 48 minutes per day - dogs, and other pets, can also boost an owner's health and wellbeing in other ways.

Dr Anne McBride, a psychologist who researches the bond between humans and animals, believes there are huge benefits to sharing your life with a pet.

She said: "Once you've found the right pet for you and your lifestyle, you get so much back from them.

"Mentally there's the benefit of companionship and the pleasure of having an animal to play with or confide in.

"This can produce positive physical effects like lower blood pressure and improved respiration. Pets also make us laugh, which is great because laughter reduces levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, and releases serotonin, which makes us feel happy."

Pets Can Lower Blood Pressure

A three-year study in Australia confirmed pet owners have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than those without pets.

Considering that more than 70,000 people in England die each year from heart disease, a condition exacerbated by stress-related spikes in blood pressure, having a pet certainly seems like a healthy idea.

It has been shown that pets can also help relieve everyday stresses which can lead to insomnia and depression.

In 1999, the State University of New York in Buffalo conducted a study of 48 stockbrokers with high blood pressure.

All were taking medication for their condition, and half were given a pet to live with as well.

When subjected to challenges designed to increase their stress, the stockbrokers with pets experienced a smaller rise in blood pressure than their pet-less counterparts.

Learn To Relax With A Fish

Ever wondered why fish are so often a feature of dentists' waiting rooms? In 1985, an American study revealed fish are at least as successful as hypnosis for calming dental patients.

Those who had watched fish in the waiting room even required less pain medication during surgery.

Children with hyperactivity disorder and Alzheimer's patients both exhibit calmer behaviour when free to gaze at brightly-coloured fish.

Clinical psychologist Jane Fossey, of the Alzheimer's Society and Society for Companion Animal Studies, says there is evidence that watching fish can improve the nutritional intake of people with Alzheimer's by around 21 per cent.

She said: "Sometimes people can lose weight because of Alzheimer's as it can mean they move around a lot or forget whether they have eaten. Watching the fish makes people more restful, and therefore more likely to sit down and take time to eat."

Dumb Animals Can Make Kids Smarter

Researchers at Warwick University found four and five-year-olds with animals at home took 18 per cent fewer sick days off school.

Jo-Ann Fowler, director of the Society for Companion Animal Studies, said: "There is research to show that children who are exposed to pets within the first year of their life have a lower incidence of hay fever and asthma and are less likely to develop allergies to animals.

"The companionship that pets provide can have a calming influence on children during stressful periods in their lives.

"For example, there is evidence that children cope better with divorce when they have a pet."

Tracy Genever, children's education officer at pet charity The Blue Cross, says that having a pet from a young age can help children to learn to care for another being and give them a sense of responsibility.

You're Never Lonely With A Pet

Psychologist Anne McBride, who researches the bond between humans and animals, believes pets can do a lot to reduce loneliness.

"A pet can be a great companion, and age or disability should be no barrier to pet ownership. Owning a new breed or species can be viewed as an adventure, an opportunity to learn about a new type of animal and develop a relationship with a creature never before considered."

According to statistics from The Pet Care Trust, pensioners who own their own pets make 21 per cent fewer visits to the doctor than those without pets.

But it's not always necessary to own your own animal to make a health gain. The charity Pets As Therapy (PAT) organise therapeutic visits, taking calm, friendly dogs and cats to hospitals, hospices, and care homes.

Their latest initiative is being pioneered at Her Majesty's Prison Hindley, a Young Offenders' Institute, where it is hoped that the presence of a dog will relax the teenage inmates.

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