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... it's all about women

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People and Pets: A Healthy Connection

by Sybil L. Holloway, Psy.D.

Charlie Brown has Snoopy. Cathy has Electra. Fred Flintstone has Dino. Lilo has Stitch. And, let us not forget, several pets have resided in the White House over the course of many presidencies (e.g., Buddy and Socks Clinton). What type of pet do you have, and how can pets enrich your life?

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (www.avma.org), "about 60% of U.S. households have at least one dog, cat, bird, or other companion animal. Many have more than one." The AVMA website also states, "there are more than 60 million pet dogs in the U.S. and nearly 70 million pet cats."

Several people also own horses, turtles, hamsters, lizards, snakes, farm animals, and a variety of other pets. People seem to enjoy the companionship of animals. That's good, because pets can improve your mental and physical health.

Mentally, pets can improve a person's mood and self-esteem, and produce increased feelings of comfort and security. Pets also provide social benefits. They are a good source of company—another living creature with whom to share space, time, and love. Single individuals are likely to feel less lonely if they have a pet. Additionally, pet owners tend to feel needed as their animal companions rely on them for food, shelter, exercise, cleaning, and general nurturing. It is often said that pets are like children in this way, and some people do treat their pets as they would a child. Pets have personalities and this helps the owner to establish a strong bond. Everyone wants to feel valued, and being acknowledged with a welcoming meow, bark, or chirp can be very rewarding and bring a smile to one's face.

Physically, pets can relieve stress, thereby improving one's overall health, and possibly

extending the owner's life expectancy. A tropical fish aquarium can be calming for its viewer, as can a napping cat. Some pet owners benefit from the exercise their pets provide. For example, walking your dog or riding your horse is good exercise for both you and your pet.

Because of the health benefits of spending time with pets, many rehabilitation programs have incorporated pet therapy into their treatment services. (See www.kobal.com and www.deltahospital.com). Patients are given time to interact with animals to play and have fun, to form a mutually satisfying relationship, and to learn to care for them. Also, individuals with disabilities will often use trained animals to assist them with daily activities. Thus, animals help people to lead better and more complete lives.



It's amazing how connected people feel to their pets. Pet pampering is so popular that there are spas for pets that encourage people to take Fluffy or Fido for major primping and styling. Makeovers are not just for humans. Believe it or not, there are even counselors who specialize in pet problems involving impaired relationships with their owners, other people, and/or other pets.

The Woman's Comfort Book: A Self-Nurturing Guide for Restoring Balance in Your Life by Jennifer Loudon (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) contains a section on "animal antidotes" which suggests ideas for using animals to improve one's life—get a pet, relax like an animal, unconditional love, nurture your pet along with yourself, and animal activism (pp. 85-88).

Many people speak about their pets with great

joy and enthusiasm. They even take their pets on vacation with them and pet-friendly hotels provide accommodations. Several friends have shared with me stories about their pets and many pictures. One woman I met twelve years ago at a journal writing workshop made a poignant journal-scrapbook entirely about her beloved dog who had passed away. Just recently I received an e-mail from a colleague who rescued a cat from a shelter; the brief blurb was heartwarming and the accompanying pictures were adorable.

Reflecting on my own experiences of living with pets brings to mind happy thoughts. As a child I had a bird that my parents won at a carnival, several goldfish, a container of sea monkeys, and an ant farm that my mother made me keep outside in the backyard. As a graduate student I lived with a housemate who owned a small-friendly poodle and a few years later I lived with four housemates and two rather aloof cats. Unfortunately, my current lease prohibits animals otherwise I would have a cat. To reap some of the benefits of spending time with animals I try to visit pet stores and zoos or enjoy other animal activities while on vacation. These nature trips have been positive and healthy.

Animals and their owners have long enjoyed mutually beneficial relationships. If you have a pet, you likely understand this from first-hand experience.

If you don't have a pet, perhaps you will consider this option for enhancing your health and life.

Some books that may be of interest: *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship* by Alan Beck, Sc.D., and Aaron Katcher, M.D. (1983). New York, NY: Perigee Books.

Dynamic Relationships in Practice: Animals in the Helping Professions by Phil Arkow, Editor (1994). Alameda, CA: The Latham Foundation.

The Four-Footed Therapist: How Your Pet Can Help You Solve Your Problems by Janet Rockett, Ed.D. (1987). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Pets and Mental Health by Odean Cusack (1988). New York, NY: The Haworth Press.

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